THUGS, THIEVES, TRICKSTERS OR POPULAR HEROES?
A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT THE PHENOMENON OF 'AYYARI

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By

Ameneh Gazerani, B.S.

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The Ohio State University

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Master’s Examination Committee:

Dr. Parvaneh Pourshariati

Dr. Dick Davis

Approved by

[Signature]

Adviser

Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures
ABSTRACT

This project examines the phenomenon of 'ayyari in various primary and secondary sources. During the medieval period, 'ayyar brotherhoods flourished in many of Iran's urban centers. Although they have attracted the attention of a wide spectrum of modern scholars, basic questions regarding their origins, organizational structure and social function remain unanswered. However, the depiction of 'ayyari is widespread in various genres of medieval literature. While most of the "official" historiographical sources at our disposal offer meager information replete with negative value judgments regarding 'ayyari, we are not totally at a loss when attempting to discuss various aspects of this very significant social institution, for there is abundant, detailed, and colorful descriptions of 'ayyari in the popular medieval literature of Iran. The aim of this study is to offer a description of 'ayyari as it appears in the popular romances, underlining the similarities between that depiction with found in the other medieval genres of literature. In other words, the factual information offered by all other genres are compared to the depiction offered by popular romances. Comparing this description with the fragmentary information discussed in different genres of medieval literature, we find that the details offered by the latter are indeed consistent with the description of the popular romances. Therefore, the depiction of 'ayyari as offered by the popular romances could not be regarded as either an imaginary product, nor as a literary topos. The parallels established between the depiction of "historical" genres and that offered by the popular romances
raises the question regarding the nature of popular romances as texts containing significant information pertinent to various aspects of medieval social history.
To my mother Maryam
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VITA

September 15, 1972......................Born- Arak, Iran

1992.................................B.S. Computer Science,
                      University of Maryland

2002-Present.........................Graduate Teaching Assistant,
                      The Ohio State University

FIELD OF STUDY

Major Field: Near Eastern Languages and Cultures.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

During the medieval period, ‘ayyar brotherhoods flourished in many of Iran’s urban centers. Although they have attracted the attention of a wide spectrum of modern scholars, basic questions regarding their origins, organizational structure and social function remain unanswered. The inability to reconstruct this significant social institution has been blamed on the lack of adequate information in the medieval sources.

However, the depiction of ‘ayyari is widespread in various genres of medieval literature. While most of the “official” historiographical sources at our disposal offer meager information replete with negative value judgments regarding ‘ayyari, we are not totally at a loss when attempting to discuss various aspects of this very significant social institution, for there is abundant, detailed, and colorful descriptions of ‘ayyari in the popular medieval literature of Iran. The explicitly articulated positive value judgment of the popular romances is drastically different than the one we find in the medieval universal histories, which although brief and devoid of any specific description of this social institution, unanimously indict ‘ayyars as professional criminals, thugs, ruffians, and troublemakers. However, the appearance of ‘ayyars is not confined to the universal histories and popular romances. As we will see, ‘ayyars are present in other genres of medieval literature as well.
On the surface, the depictions offered by various sources, however, do not paint a comprehensive picture of the ‘ayyars. Many questions arise from the contradictory depictions of the ‘ayyars. How were they organized and what was their social function?

The aim of this study is to offer a description of ‘ayyari as it appears in the popular romances, underlining the similarities between that depiction with found in the other medieval genres of literature. In other words, the factual information offered by all other genres are compared to the depiction offered by popular romances. In doing so, I will argue, that despite the sometimes contemptuous value judgment of the official historiography, the details that it provides are very much consistent with the description of the ‘ayyars as we find it in the popular romances.

In the first chapter of this study, I will examine the secondary literature produced by the modern scholarship on ‘ayyari. As we will see, this scholarship has failed to offer a distinctive and comprehensive definition of this social institution. In addition to the problem of the sources, which is at the center of the discussion in this study, the modern scholars have mingled the áyyars with members of similar social institutions such as fetyan, akhian, and the mystical brotherhoods. This scholarship has mainly depended on works of official historiography in its attempts to shed light on aspects of ‘ayyari. Due to the meager and fragmentary information contained in such sources, it has turned to similar brotherhoods whose history has been well documented in comparison to that of the ‘ayyars. This approach, however, is very problematic in that it does not define the ‘ayyars as a distinct social group, but in terms of their similarities with other associations.
While there are many references to the pre-Islamic origins of ‘ayyari, so far the evidence presented for this claim have not been convincing.

In the second chapter of this study, I will examine the depictions of ‘ayyari in three medieval genres of universal histories, local histories, and didactic literature. The meager information offered by the universal histories of al-Tabari and al-Mas’udi are then discussed in detail. Despite the fact that the universal histories hold the most contemptuous view of ‘ayyari, the details offered in each are consistent with the descriptions of the popular romances. The same is true for the local histories of Tarikh-e Sistan and Tarikh-e Bayhaq, works which provide a different scope and spectrum of information. Finally, two works of didactic literature, the Qabusnameh and Javame’ al-Hekayat, are discussed for the valuable information they provide regarding the ethics of the ‘ayyars. Like the information obtained from the universal and local histories, the details offered by these sources mirror the descriptions offered by the popular romances.

Divided in two parts, chapter three offers a description of ‘ayyari as it appears in the popular romances of Samak-e ‘Ayyar and the Abu Muslim Nameh. The first part of this chapter is concerned with the organizational structure, the social background and the makeup of the brotherhoods, while the second part focuses on the skills and operations of the ‘ayyars. It is with the aid of the detailed descriptions offered by these two narratives that we get a sense of who the ‘ayyars were, how they were organized, and how they operated.

Comparing this description with the fragmentary information discussed in chapter two, we find that the details offered by the latter are indeed consistent with the
description of the popular romances. Therefore, the depiction of ‘ayyari as offered by the popular romances could not be regarded as either an imaginary product, nor as a literary topos. This, however, raises a serious question regarding the nature of the popular romances. If the depiction of ‘ayyari contained in them does reflect the social and historical reality, then perhaps scholarship needs to reevaluate the potential value of this body of literature for reconstruction of aspects of medieval Iranian social history.
CHAPTER 2

‘AYYARI: THE STATE OF THE FIELD

Although ‘ayyari has been the subject of many studies from as early as the beginning of the 20th century, the current state of the scholarship fails to answer basic questions regarding this very significant social institution. Two crucial problems or obstacles, however one may choose to perceive them, have plagued scholars when trying to reconstruct various aspects of ‘ayyari: first and foremost is the nature of the sources, which will be discussed in this and the following chapter. The second obstacle is the existence of similar (fraternal organizations) brotherhoods in the same periods, and the inability of scholarship to make distinctions between them. The “official” sources at our disposal offer meager information replete with negative value judgments regarding ‘ayyari, and to complicate matters, the relation of the ‘ayyars to the fetyan, akhis, professional guilds and mystical brotherhoods is by no means clear. Even the very etymology of the word is disputed. According to the Arabic etymology the word ‘ayyar comes from the root ‘aira or ‘ara, which means someone who goes to and fro, circulating about briskly and energetically. Khanlari provides a Persian etymology, claiming the word ‘ayyar to be of Middle Persian origin, constructed from the expression ey yaar (Oh
companion). Confusion regarding the nature, ethics and the activities of the ‘ayyars, therefore, remains.

The problem of the nature of the sources lies at the center of this mayhem. The historical sources not only do not offer details as to the organization, ethics and the function of the ‘ayyars in the society, but they also contain, for the most part, negative value judgments. This raises the question of the credibility of their judgment, as we will see, however they too offer details which in many cases are consistent with those we find in the popular romances. In the second chapter of this study I will discuss some of the genres of the medieval literature, which contain information regarding the ‘ayyars. The second problem, which I refer to as “lack of distinction”, namely the inability of scholars to define distinctive and sometimes distinguishing attributes of the similar social institution, is also partly but not entirely a result of the nature of the sources. These problems become more clear as I discuss the various works of scholarship on this topic.

Franz Taeschner, one of the first scholars who contributed to the study of early and medieval social history of the Islamic world, has mainly focused on the futuwwa brotherhoods.¹ In his article, which he wrote for the Encyclopedia of Islam for the ‘ayyar entry, he defines the term as follows: “rascal, tramp, vagabond; From the 9th to 12th

century it was the name for certain warriors who were grouped together under futunwa in 'Irak, Persia, and gradually also in Transjordania,, similar to the Ahdath in Syria and Mesopotamia, and to the rindan (v. Akhi) in Anatolia". From the outset then Taechner, instead of attempting to define the 'ayyars in distinctive terms, points to their similarity to other groups, groups which have been equally vaguely defined. Furthermore, his definition of the term, as it appears in the beginning of the article, does not discuss the etymology of the term but merely reflects the aforementioned negative value judgment of the primary sources. The remainder of the article is devoted to listing some sources, which discuss 'ayyars or one of the other similar groups. Although other works which will be discussed below utilize a greater number of sources, this short article mirrors the state of the field. Elsewhere however, Taeschner characterizes 'ayyars as "lesser" futunwa brotherhoods whose goal was to establish a kind of justice through violence and without consideration for the law. Taeschner asserts that it is because of their disregard for the law and the power establishment that the government officials and the religious scholars, who for the most part authored the sources, define them as robbers and vagabonds. He claims that since they were of an "illiterate" background, they did not leave any sources offering self-depiction, and instead scholars such as himself have no choice but to rely on the meager evidence offered by the official chroniclers, who speak negatively of the 'ayyars. Although in this work Taeschner points to the fact of the hostile depiction of the official sources, he accepts their depiction due to what is to be

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3 Taeschner F., Beitraege zur Arabistik, Semitistic, und Islamwissenschaft, p.348.
presumed the lack of alternate sources. Another interesting issue addressed here is that of the social background of the ‘ayyars.

In his article in the Encyclopedia Iranica, Cahen repeats much of the same information. However, despite the fact that his approach, like Taeschner’s, suffers from the problem of “lack of distinction,” he does at least speculate, about the origin of the ‘ayyars. He claims that there is little doubt about the pre-Islamic origin and the distinctively Iranian customs of the ‘ayyars; however, the only piece of evidence he offers is that up to the Mongol invasion they were only to be found in territories which belonged to the former Sasanian empire. This claim, if substantiated through further study of the origin of the ‘ayyars, would have significant ramifications not only for the history of ‘ayyars, but also for the social history of early Islamic Iran. Aside from the question of origin, Cahen does not address the critical issues of source and depiction, and confines himself to saying that the historians and the authors called them by contemptuous names such as scoundrels, ragamuffins, and outlaws, and alleged that they abandoned themselves to various kinds of disorderly behavior and imposed their “protection” on merchants and notables at a price. By acknowledging the bias of the official sources, both Taeschner and Cahen reach a dead-end in their attempt to reconstruct aspects of ‘ayyari.

In the second part of the article under the entry of ‘ayyar, William Hanaway offers a list of the Persian medieval sources that contain references to ‘ayyari. He divides the sources into three categories based on their value judgment: the official and local

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\(^5\) Claude Cahen, Cambridge History of Iran, Volume 3(I), pp. 320-21.
histories which depict ‘ayyari negatively, the "neutral sources", and the sources which represent ‘ayyars in a positive sense. The latter group are the pre-Safavid popular romances, where according to Hanaway “the ‘ayyars are popular heroes, deeply motivated by the ideas of jawanmardi. One of the functions of these romances must have been to portray and transmit the ideals of ‘ayyari to an illiterate population. In doing so, they present a view of ‘ayyars quite at odds with that found in the works of court historians”6. While Hanaway acknowledges the contradictory value judgments in the different sources, his approach in categorizing the sources based on their representation, as we shall see, is not accurate for all the sources he lists. Additionally, many official or “neutral” sources, while hostile in their judgment of the ‘ayyars, contain details that are similar to the ones found in the popular romances. An example of such a source is Tarikh-e Sistan, which Hanaway has assigned to the first category, namely the hostile sources. However, as I hope will become apparent from the discussion in the following chapter, Tarikh-e Sistan by no means holds a contemptuous view of the ‘ayyars. On the contrary, because of its pro-Safarid bias and given that Yaq’ub Layth the founder of the Safarid dynasty is said to have come from an ‘ayyar background, it is the only “historical” source that does not speak of ‘ayyars as troublemakers and ruffians. Furthermore, Tarikh-e Sistan does provide details, especially regarding the modes of operations of the ‘ayyars, which are similar to that of the ‘ayyars depicted in the popular romances. Although he singles out the popular romances as the richest genre of medieval literature as far as ‘ayyari is concerned, he does not claim that their depiction reflects reality. Instead he maintains that the function of the representation, as it appears in the

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popular romances, is to construct an ideal form of ‘ayyari. He does not explain, however, what this ideal form of ‘ayyari is, and how it came into being.

Adopting the same approach as Hanaway, Khanlari and Mahjoub, along with other Iranian scholars, attempt to describe aspects of ‘ayyari as depicted in the popular medieval romances\(^7\). An example of such work is Khanlari’s article on the ethics of the ‘ayyars. Solely based on quotations from Samak-e ‘Ayyar, the article is organized under seven headings, each describing a virtue upheld by the ‘ayyars\(^8\). In each section of the article we find a few relevant quotes from Samak-e ‘Ayyar with little or no analysis on the part of the author. Similarly, the introductory volume to Khanlari’s edition of Samak-e ‘Ayyar mainly consists of such classifications and description. While these articles offer glimpses into the world of ‘ayyars of the popular romances, they are neither comprehensive in their depiction, nor do they situate the representation of the popular romances in a greater social and historical context. Despite their shortcomings, these works are unique since at the very least they introduce the genre of popular romances to Iranian scholarship, and hint at the enormous amount of valuable information contained in them.

In addition to the above-mentioned articles, Mahjoub authored a book on the subject of futuwwa and ‘ayyari\(^9\). In this work, he is mainly concerned with the historical transformation of the social institutions of fetyan. Majoub uses a great number of sources,

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\(^8\) These virtues are: keeping secrets, honesty, helping those in need, chastity, sacrifice, generosity, loyalty (being the friend of the friend and the enemy of the enemy).

including historical chronicles, mystical treaties, local histories, and the popular romances, as well as a number of futuwanamas (self-descriptive works of fetyan). Therefore, the study is valuable in the richness of its primary sources, which have been very well documented. At the same time, the problem of “lack of distinction,” which plagues most of the scholarship on this subject appears in its worst possible form in this work. Attempting to describe futuwwa in the first chapter of his book, Majoub lays out the mainly linguistic evidence, obtained from the sources of Islamic tradition (Qur’an, Tafsir, Hadith) with those descriptions of javanmardi found in Samak-e ‘Ayyar. Therefore, by juxtaposing such material without any discussion of the broader context of either one of the traditions, the reader is left confused from the beginning of the work. Furthermore, his lack of crïtical approach to the sources results in contradictory statements which he makes regarding the ‘ayyars activities and their social role. Despite the fact that he does not distinguish between the two groups claiming that establishing such distinction is impossible,¹⁰ he alludes to the fact that the ‘ayyars and the fetyan had distinct origins.¹¹ While he claims the ‘ayyars to be of a pre-Islamic origin, he regards the futuwwa as having flourished after the establishment of Islamic rule. In accordance with this argument, he claims that it was as early as the Umayyad era when futuwwa became intermingled with ‘ayyari, creating new customs, rituals, organization, and even a new language¹². Mahjoub is very much concerned with the process of cooption of futuwwa by the power establishment, a process which was achieved during the reign of the ‘Abassid caliph Nasir. Pondering on the possible causes of this institutionalization, Mahjoub

¹⁰ ibid, p.117.
¹¹ ibid, p.28.
¹² ibid, p.28.
asserts that it was the strength and popularity of these brotherhoods that left the rulers with no other choice than to join them in order to control them. Another interesting argument articulated by Mahjoub is the social role of ‘ayyars as instruments of justice. Both in their official role as espahsaras and as forces of opposition, ‘ayyars are viewed as fighting for the cause of justice. However, Mahjoub takes the audience’s familiarity with this particular brand of justice for granted, and does not elaborate on its meaning, significance and history. At the same time, he does not address the contradictory depictions of ‘ayyars, as thieves, robbers and professional criminals. Overall, however, this study is of great value, not only for the spectrum of the primary sources it utilizes, but also for the very interesting (although not always substantiated) observations of the author.

In his book Sasanid Soldiers in Early Muslim Society, Zakeri approaches the question of the origin of the ‘ayyars from a new angle. In his own words, his main thesis suggests that “the militia known as ‘ayyaran in early Muslim society were descendents of the Sasanid elite troops, the asbaran. According to this proposal a division of land-holding soldiers, who owed service to the king in return for land they received from central treasury, existed under Sasanids. These were azadan, or the independent small landlords and warriors, who constituted the lesser nobility in the Sasanid Empire and performed the function of tax-collectors and lords in villages”. The argument necessitates the examination of some aspects of late-Sasanid history, which is why almost

13 ibid, p.107.
14 ibid, p.120.
one third of the study is devoted to it. The author asserts that Khusrow Anushirvan’s reforms curtailed the power of the land-holding nobility by creating cavalry forces that were loyal to the Great King. In doing so the king put his reliance on the small proprietors (azadan), or the lesser nobility who were poor compared to the rest of the nobility. In return for their obligatory military service, the newly created cavalry received land donations, hence a new class of nobility whose prestige was defined in terms of the personal ambition of the king. As a result of this process, the azadan rose to positions of powers, such as functioning as marzbans (provincial military and civil administrators) and dihqans (village lords and holders of small and medium sized property). At the same time a standing army was created from among their ranks, which served to balance the power of the archaic landlords. One of the major functions of this new military system was its role as a bridge between the ruling house and the subjected population. According to Zakeri, the most significant feature of this military nobility was its “warrior ideal, asbar, the champion who personified the ethos of the fighting class”\textsuperscript{16}. Having established the existence of this new military class, Zakeri proceeds to argue that “these cavalry fighters formed the king’s personal bodyguards, reliable associates, and palace attendants (pushtigban, sarhangan, pahlawan). The organization of the palace, its ceremonies, and the protection of its residents also required a large body of functionaries. When employed to fill such posts, these warriors were called ayyaran (friends, companions, helpers) of the king. This word has become ‘ayyaran in Arabic’\textsuperscript{17}. Although Zakeri’s version of later-Sasanid history needs to be examined further, his suggestion

\textsuperscript{16} ibid, p. 93.
\textsuperscript{17} ibid, p.94.
regarding the creation of a new military-landholding nobility is well argued. However, nowhere in the evidence which he presents, is the term ‘ayyar used to describe a companion to the king. Therefore, by ascribing the function of ‘ayyari to members of the newly created cavalry who happened to be companions of the king, Zakeri takes a huge leap of faith. In other words, he presents no conclusive evidence which would link the asbaran to the ‘ayyars, and his argument is based on circumstantial evidence. Zakeri’s only link between the asbaran and the ‘ayyars is based on the meaning of the word ‘ayyar (obviously he accepts the Persian etymology of the word, and hence it would mean “companion”), and the fact that members of asbaran were companions of the king. However, not only is this evidence not convincing, but there are also a number of problems which would arise if the origin of the ‘ayyars was the Sassanid asbaran. First, unlike the ‘ayyars, the asbaran were a cavalry force. As a matter of fact, the primary sources usually underline the fact that the ‘ayyars were not mounted warriors. In addition to that, the ‘ayyars are never depicted as warriors in the conventional sense of the term. Their operations usually are not carried out on the battlefield, and the majority of the skills and techniques associated with ‘ayyari could by no stretch of imagination be identified as military skills. Another major problematic with which Zakeri has not dealt is the anti-authoritarian nature of the ‘ayyars. If their origins, and hence their ethics, are rooted in the military nobility whose function was to provide services to the king, how has the group and its ethics been transformed to assume the opposite role vis-à-vis the political authority?
In the remaining sections of the book, the author traces the presence of various groups of Sasanid military in the new Muslim society, and examines their role in wars of conquests and their social status in the garrison towns. Since he has argued for a clear connection between the *azadan, asbaran,* and *‘ayyaran,* he carefully examines references to either one of the three groups in early Islamic literature, underlining the significance of their presence in the urban centers of the Islamic world. For example, when recounting the episode of siege of Baghdad (810 AD)\(^{18}\), Zakeri points out that the majority of the defenders of Baghdad were composed of *fetyan,* *‘ayyaran,* and *‘abna.* The latter group is defined as the descendents of the Sasandi *asbaran* who had resided in various geographical regions, including the ‘Abbasid Baghdad. Only in describing the battle of *‘abna* in Baghdad, does Zakeri allude to the fact that like the *‘ayyars,* these forces were no longer mounted.\(^{19}\) This observation is significant since virtually all the sources which contain references to *‘ayyari* describe them as not mounted with unconventional weaponry and military tactics. However, although Zakeri’s argument for existence and the “Iranian” origin of the *‘abna* in the ‘Abbasid army seems convincing, the relationship between this group and the *‘ayyar* remains unclear. In other words, although he has established a link between the *asbaran* and the *‘abna,* the argument that the same connection could also be applied to the *‘ayyars* without any supporting evidence, is not convincing. One may even speculate that these groups actually were quite distinct, and perhaps what remained from the Sasanid cavalry in the Muslim society constituted military groups other than *‘ayyars.* Although there seems to be little doubt about the pre-

\(^{18}\) The siege of Baghdad will be discussed in the following chapter.

\(^{19}\) ibid, p.288.
Islamic origin of the ‘ayyars, Zakeri’s thesis fails to make the some crucial connections and leaves some significant questions unanswered.

The modern scholarship, as is apparent from the discussion in this chapter, has not only been interested in the social institution of ‘ayyari, but has explored different aspects of it from various angles. However, the fact remains that the scholarship has failed to offer a clear and distinctive description of this social organization. With the exception of Zakeri’s work, the descriptions offered merely repeat the negative value-judgments of the primary sources, since the scholars only rely on the official works of Islamic historiography. Since the descriptions contained in the official sources are meager, however, some scholars have turned to the popular romances for further descriptions of ‘ayyari. Not only do studies of this nature offer merely fragmentary descriptions of some aspects of ‘ayyari, they regard these sources as lacking “historical” value. As such even the incomplete descriptions of ‘ayyari are viewed to reflect an ideal which has seeped into the popular literary consciousness.

The only serious attempt to shed light on origins of ‘ayyari, undertaken by Zakeri, builds a theory based on insufficient evidence, and ignores crucial problematics that would arise as a consequence of accepting such a theory.

As previously mentioned, the major obstacle faced by modern scholarship in reconstructing the social institution of ‘ayyari is the nature of the “official” primary sources.
The descriptions of ‘ayyari are scarce, and overshadowed by the author’s contemptuous attitude toward the ‘ayyars. In the following chapter, I will discuss some of the depictions offered by different medieval genres of literature.
CHAPTER 3

DEPICTION OF ‘AYYARI IN MEDIEVAL LITERARY GENRES

The current scholarship leaves many basic questions regarding the social institution of ‘ayyari unanswered. As mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the main problems is the nature of the primary sources at our disposal.

In this chapter, I will attempt to describe depictions of ‘ayyari in four medieval genres: the universal histories, the local histories, the didactic literature, and the popular medieval romances. The scholarship has reached a consensus regarding the definition of the genres of universal histories and the didactic literature.\(^{20}\) However this is not the case for the local histories and the popular medieval romances. A number of contemporary historians have raised the question of whether the local histories constitute an inclusive genre of historiography, and attempted to define the common characteristics of these works.\(^{21}\) However, in the case of the popular medieval romances, while the existence of a host of loosely grouped narratives is recognized, the initial move towards definition of an


inclusive genre has not been made. Therefore, in the absence of a comprehensive study of these works, the scholars who have studied aspects of these narratives have used various names, such as popular romances, epic-romances, or folk narratives to refer to this body of literature. Although I will not attempt to take on the task of defining a genre, I will provide background and discuss characteristics of the popular romances used heavily in this thesis.

While the depictions within each genre are not always consistent, I find this organization most comprehensive for assessing the concept of 'ayyari in the medieval literature. The sources discussed in this chapter are spread out over the span of almost five centuries (10th -15th century AD). This could potentially present a problem in that some could argue that the social institution itself obviously underwent enormous transformation in this long period. This argument would be valid had the aim of this chapter been to reconstruct the social institution of 'ayyari based on all the sources. However, the aim of this study is to demonstrate and highlight the similarities of the depiction of 'ayyari across genres. As we will see, despite their different and sometimes contrasting value judgments there are similarities between the depictions of 'ayyari as offered by the popular romances and other medieval genres examined in this chapter.

**Universal Histories**

Generally contemptuous in its description of 'ayyari, the genre of universal histories offers meager and scattered information with regards to the 'ayyars. Both Tabari

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and Mas'udi mentioned the ‘ayyars when relating the account of the siege of Baghdad (197 h.). The siege of Baghdad took place in the aftermath of succession struggles, and previous civil unrest after the death of the ‘Abbasid Caliph, Harun al-Rashid (786-809 A.D.). The two camps who fought out numerous battles in Baghdad were composed of loyalists to al-Rashid’s sons, al-Amin or al-Ma’mun, both of whom claimed to be the rightful successor to his father. Al-M’amun’s army and base of support was from the Eastern Iranian province of Khurasan, while al-Amin particularly relied on the abna’, who are said to have been the first generation of the Khurasanian army responsible for toppling the Umayyad dynasty. The abna’ were deeply involved in the military, political and commercial life of the Baghdad. However, they were not the only military constituency represented in the army of al-Amin. Fighting on behalf of al-Amin, the ‘ayyars are mingled up with various other groups, such as “naked ones, people from the prisons, riffraff, rabble, cutpurses” Before discussing al-Tabari’s depiction of ‘ayyars a few words need to be said regarding Tabari’s portrayal of the conflict between the brothers. A careful reading of the account of siege of Baghdad reveals the pro-Ma’mun bias of the author. Adopting a literary-analytical approach to the narrative, El-Hibri, has studied A-Tabari’s depiction of these events, underlining Tabari’s anti-Amin agenda. The depiction of ‘ayyars, who fought on al-Amin’s behalf, therefore, must be viewed in the context of the author’s bias.

26 Al-tabar, p.139
The best summary of Tabari’s characterization of the āyyars can be found in the story of the battle between one of the commander’s of Tahir b. Husayn of Pushang (the leader of al-Ma’mun’s army) with an āyyar:

It has been mentioned: One of Tahir’s Khurasanian commanders, a man of courage and strength, went out one day to fight. Seeing some unclothed men without weapons, he said to his companions in scorn and contempt, “Are only these whom I see fighting us?” “Yes,” he was told, “these whom you see are the plague!” “Fie on you,” he said, “shrinking from them and holding back, when you have splendid weapons, equipment, and strength, as well as bravery and courage! What could the devices of these I see accomplish, when they have no weapons, no equipment, and no armor to protect them?” So he strung his bow and went forward. One of the men [on the other side] saw him and went toward him with a pitch-covered reed mat in his hand and horse’s nose bag full of stones under his arm. Whenever the Khurasanian shot an arrow, the vagrant [‘āyyar] covered himself, and the arrow fell on his mat or near him. He would take it and put it into a part of his reed mat he had prepared for that purpose and had fashioned like a quiver. Whenever an arrow fell, he would take it and cry out, “A daniq!” —that is to say, he had obtained the value of one daniq (daniq or danaq was a small coin, one-sixth of a dirham). The Khurasanian and the vagrant continued at this until the Khurasanian exhausted his arrows, He then rushed at the vagrant to strike him with his sword. The latter took a stone out of his bag, put it into a sling, hurled it, and did not miss the man’s eye. Then he hurled another and would have knocked the man off his horse, had he not dodged it. The man wheeled around and retreated, saying, “These people are not human beings!”

Although ridiculed and belittled by the Khurasanian commander, with whom the author sympathizes, the ‘āyyar is the one who ultimately wins the battle. However, our ‘āyyar is by no means a conventional warrior. He does not possess weapons, his armor is

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made out of reed mat, and his only other weapon is a bag of stones he carries under his arm. It is also clear that the 'ayyar is not mounted, while the Khurasanian commander is. The latter is defeated, after the 'ayyar throws a stone aimed at his eye, which indeed blinds him. These details are significant, as they clearly reflect the fact that the 'ayyars were not part of the official army of al-Amin. At the same time, they are described as having unusual weapons and fighting skills which are effective. It is important to keep in mind, that, as we shall see, the 'ayyars of the popular romances do not usually partake in military campaigns. Their operations, which I will describe in detail in the following chapter, involve the utilization of unconventional weapons and skills, and due to the nature of the operations they are not and could not be a cavalry force. Another interesting detail revealed in this passage is the implicit commentary on the social background of the 'ayyar character. He is not only unclothed and does not possess a horse or weapons, but he even saves the missed arrows, exclaiming their small monetary value! The story of the arrows underlines the 'ayyar’s humble social background, another detail which is consistent with the depiction of the popular romances. I will elaborate on the depiction of the popular romances, but for the purposes of Tabari’s description, it is important to keep these parallels in mind.

The poetry that follows this story highlights the characteristics of the 'ayyars:

These wars have brought men forward
Who are not from the Arab tribes
Of Southern or Northern descent (Qahtan, and Nizar)
A band armed with breast-plates of wool
Have hurled themselves into battle
Like starving lions. A helmet
Of palm leaves protects their heads,
A reed mat serves as a shield.

22
They do not know what it is to flee,
Even at that hour when the bravest
Flees from the lances.
A single one of them, not even
Clad in a lion-cloth, will attack
Two thousand men. A hero cries
As he strikes: “Take that!
Compliments of the ‘ayyar!”29

Perhaps the most significant piece of information in this poem is the clue to the ethnic background of the ‘ayyars. Nizar and Qahtan, the two great ethnic groups of Arabs, were not tribes in the historical sense, but a fictitious invention, labels intended to serve describe the two political entities of North and South Arabia. However, Arab tribes did consider themselves as belonging to the one or the other.30 Therefore, describing them as belonging to neither Nizar or Qahtan, the author alludes to the fact that the ‘ayyars were not Arabs. The ‘ayyars’ unusual weapons and armor (woolen breast plates and reed-mat shields) sets them apart from the regular military forces.

Therefore, Tabari’s depiction, although not very extensive, reveals details regarding some aspects of ‘ayyari. First and foremost we learn that the ‘ayyars were not a conventional military force. They were not mounted, and their weapons and military skills were unusual. Despite all of this however, they displayed great ability to fight against the regular military forces of al-Ma’mun. The other piece of information revealed in Tabari’s account is their non-Arab ethnic background.

Like Tabari, Mas’udi also provides similar descriptions of the siege of Baghdad, and the involvement of the ‘ayyars in it. According to him, in Baghdad gangs of ruffians and vagabonds armed with cudgels collected protection money from shops and policed neighborhoods, controlling the local rackets and protecting them from rival gangs based in other quarters. Mas’udi describes their military organization and skills as follows:

They went into battle almost naked, wearing only short trousers or drawers. They made themselves a sort of helmet out of plaited palm-leaves, which they called khudh. Their Shields were made out of these same leaves and of reed mats coated with tar and stuffed with sand and gravel. Each band of ten men was commanded by an ‘arif, ten ‘arif by a naqib, ten naqib, by a qa’id, and ten qa’id by an amir. Each of these officers had human mounts, proportionate to the number of men he commanded. Thus the ‘arif had, as well as his soldiers, a certain number of men who served as horses. Similarly, the naqib, the qa’id and the amir had as mounts men who were naked, with bells and pompons of red and yellow wool around their necks. They had bridles and bits and had made themselves horsetails out of broom and fly-whisks. The ‘arif went against the enemy mounted on one of these men and preceded by ten soldiers, each wearing his palm-leaf helmet and carrying a reed-mat shield. The naqib, the qa’id and the amir marched into battle with similar equipages.31

As in Tabari, Mas’udi in this passage emphasizes the unusual weapons of the ‘ayyars. The descriptions of the weapons and armor and shields match Tabari’s description. Since in Mas’udi’s account, the description of the weapons is more detailed, one gets the sense that these described weapons were hastily “improvised”. For example we learn that their shields were made out of palm-leaves and of reed-mats coated with tar

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31 Mas’udi, Meadows of Gold: The ‘Abbasids, p. 154
and stuffed with sand and gravel. If the assumption about the improvised nature of their weaponry is true, one may conclude that the ‘ayyars not only were not a regular military force, but they were not to participate in battles at all. Therefore they had other ways of operation as a paramilitary force. In the popular medieval romances, there are detailed descriptions of what ‘ayyari operations entailed. However, this is not the case with Tabari’s description, and one can only guess that these unconventional warriors had other skills and expertise, but due to the circumstances engaged in a fight on the battlefield.

Mas’udi’s description leaves no doubt that the ‘ayyars were not mounted warriors. Having to fight with a cavalry force, however, they used their fellow ‘ayyars as horses. Given the large number of men participating in these battles, perhaps the warriors needed to be distinguished from the men who served as horses. This may explain why the “horses” wore bells and pompoms of red and yellow wool. Mas’udi also tells us, that these men called their helmets khudh, which is the Persian word for helmet and may be a hint to the ethnicity of the ‘ayyars as Persians.

Mas’udi’s depiction of the ‘ayyars is very similar to that of Tabari. However, Mas’udi provides additional information, such as how the unusual weapons used by ‘ayyars, were put together. The improvised nature of their weapons alludes to the fact that the ‘ayyars, were not a regular military force, and as such only rarely engaged in battles. Mas’udi is also very explicit in describing the ‘ayyars as not possessing mounts. His description of men mounting other men, and the mechanism they used to differentiate between the warriors and “horses” is interesting, and strengthens the argument that the ‘ayyars’ realm of operation was usually not the battlefield. However, since the
situation demanded that they encounter a cavalry force, they once again improvised the means to encounter such force.

Local Histories

The two local histories examined in this chapter offer varying descriptions of ‘ayyari. Not only the descriptions of details of ‘ayyari are different, but the sources’ value judgments of ‘ayyars are quite different as well. The first source to be examined is Tarikh-i Sistan, which is an anonymous history of Sistan. The work is clearly the work of more than one author, the first and major part of which deals with the early history of Sistan and with the Saffarids while the second part covers events from 1073 A.D. to 1326 A. D. Tarikh-i Bayhaq is the work of Zahir al-Din ‘Ali ibn Zayd al-Bayhaqi, known as Ibn Funduq (c. 1097-1169).

While Tarikh-e Sistan is sympathetic in its depiction, Tarikh-e Bayhaq offers rather hostile portrayals of ‘ayyars. However, regardless of the verdict the ‘ayyars receive from each author, there is unique information contained in them. The story of the downfall of the ‘Abbasid power in Sistan and the remarkable rise of Ya’qub b. al-Layth has been given in considerable detail in Tarikh-e Sistan. Prior to his rise to power, the ‘ayyar groups were powerful; they managed to seize control of the land and end Tahirid (and ultimately ‘Abbasid) authority in Sistan.

According to Tarikh-i Sistan, after the Tahrid power came to an end, Ya’qub, who was a coppersmith and seems to have been vigorous and resourceful, moved to the life of
an ‘ayyar and joined the ‘ayyar leader of Bust, Salih b. Al-Nasr. Tarikh-e Sistan does not provide the information regarding Ya’qub’s modest position, and attributes Salih’s rise to power to Ya’qub’s strength. However, as Bosworth notes, Tarikh-e Sistan is sympathetic to the Saffarid dynasty, and as such it is possible that the humble origins of Ya’qub may have been omitted. Bosworth argues based on Gardizi’s account of Yaq’ub’s rise to power that he indeed was a member of an ‘ayyar group, and later he assumed the leadership position within his group.

The political climate of Sistan at this time was already far from being calm. During the last decades of Caliphal and Tahirid rule, it became the center for Kharajism. As a consequence, the Kharajites not only questioned the legitimacy of the ruling power, but they also rose up in revolts. At the same time, according to Bosworth, groups of ‘ayyars were formed as a reaction to the revolts and the violence of the Kharajites. Although it is true that the ‘ayyars at this particular period of time rallied against the Kharajites, it seems unlikely that the group was formed as a reaction to the Kharajites, as Bosworth claims.

According to Tarikh-e Sistan, Saleh b. Al-Nasr, who was a leader of ‘ayyars, rose up against the Tahirid officials in Bust in the year 854 A. D. Ibrahim ibn Hozayn (Ibrahim al-Qusi), The Tahirid governor of Sistan sent his son Muhammad ibn Ibrahim to fight

32 Bust was a city in the eastern part of the Saffarid heartlands, which was considered to be in Sistan, but is treated with less detail than Zarang by the geographers (Bosworth, 57-8).
33 E. C. Bosworth, The History of Saffarids in Sistan and Maliks of Nimruz, p.72.
35 Bosworth, p. 69.
36 There are several problems with this theory: first, the origin of ‘ayyari, is most likely pre-Islamic, second Bosworth himself admits that the ‘ayyars had ambiguous behavior in regard to the upholding of law and order, and their loyalty was not clear either. In other words, if the ‘ayyari was formed as a response to the Kharajite movement, one would expect that their position vis-à-vis the power establishment would have been somewhat consistent.
him. Muhammad retreats into the city of Bust and shuts himself up in the citadel. What follows is an account of how the 'ayyars managed to break into the city, and since it very much resembles the 'ayyari operations described in the popular romances, it is worth further examination:

Saleh entered [the city] at night; and he, Ya’qub ibn al-Lays, and his two brothers, ‘Amr and ‘Ali, and Derham ibn Nazr, and Hamed ibn ‘Amr, who was called Sar-Navak, along with the ‘ayyars of Sistan, stayed at the home of ‘Abd Allah ibn al-Qasem. In the morning Saleh came out, and his followers among the Sistanis, of whom there were many, gathered around him. [In the meanwhile] Ebrahim al-Quisi (governor of Sistan) assembled elders and lawyers and gave arms to his army, foot soldiers as well as horsemen. Then he sent Ebrahim ibn Beshr ibn Farqad, Sharak ibn al-Nazr, and ‘Osman ibn ‘Affan to Saleh to inquire what he was doing there. They appeared before Saleh, greeted him, and asked him that. Saleh replied: “I came here today to fight the Kharajites, and today or tomorrow I shall leave: Ebrahim al-Quisi and I are not at war.” So the elders (mashayekh) returned with his message. Whereupon Saleh rode off, along with his army and his supporters, and on the way to Sar-e Lashkar he came upon the moat which was dry. Before he entered it, the army of Ibrahim al-Quisi, fully armed had taken their stand in the moat before the Dar-Ta’an. But when they saw Saleh and his army, they retired into the sharestan and shut themselves in … Hamed Sar-Navek and the ‘ayyars of Sistan then dismounted and scaled the wall, and climbed upon the roof of ibn Malek, which is now a caravanserai. Then they went out the door of his house and opened the gates of the sharestan and killed a great many people.37

The ‘ayyars enter the city at night. This is significant, since the ‘ayyars of popular romances are conducting most of their activities at night, and therefore they often are referred to as shabro (night-strollers). The second significant detail is how the ‘ayyars under the leadership of Saleh trick the ‘ulema into believing that the purpose of their presence in Bust is to fight the Kharajites. Encountering the army of Ibrahim Qusi they

force them to take refuge in a sharestan. In order to gain access to the sharestan, the 'ayyars perform an operation which is typical of how the 'ayyars of Abu Muslim Nameh and Samak-e 'Ayyar operate: they scale the walls, and climb up the roof of the house which is in the proximity of the sharestan. After having entered the house, they go out the door of this house and open the gates of the sharestan. As we will see in the following chapter, one of the skills that is associated with 'ayyari is the ability to gain access to otherwise impregnable spaces. As described in this episode, the mode of operation of the 'ayyars is very much consistent with that of the 'ayyars in the popular romances.

A few years later, Salih gained control of the city of Zarang (857 A. D.). The 'ayyars forced Ibrahim, the 'Abbasid governor of Zarang to seek an allegiance with the Kharijites. Salih's 'ayyars adopted the 'Abbasid color of black, against the white banners of Kharijites. The notables and the 'ulama of Zarang were forced to support the 'ayyars, for their fear of the Kharijites was greater than their suspicions of 'ayyars. Additionally, Tarikh-e Sistan includes a detailed description of a division between Bost 'ayyars and Sistani 'ayyars, which ultimately led to the defeat of Salih by Ya'qub. Although these details may not seem significant on the surface, considering the complete silence on the part of universal histories regarding the organization and practices of the 'ayyars, the detail provided is valuable, especially when compared to depictions of 'ayyari in the popular romances. An example of such information is the reference to the division of the 'ayyars of Bost and those of Sistan. The popular romances depict each group of 'ayyars as belonging to a certain urban center. These distinct groups of 'ayyars may become

allies or rivals, depending on the particular circumstances described in each narrative. However, the significant factor is that they are identified as the ‘ayyars of a specific city, and we see the evidence of such organization in *Tarikh-i Sistan*.

Another episode in which the ‘ayyars are mentioned takes place during the time of the Samanid occupation of Sistan in November of 911. According to *Tarikh-i Sistan*, Mansur b. Ishaq, the Samanid governor of the Sistan, promised to treat the people of Sistan well, but in practice he aroused their resentment. The Samanid army of occupation of Sistan, which according to an understanding between the Saffarids and the Samanids was supposed to stay outside of the capital, now swarmed into Zarang, taking over houses there, billeting themselves on the citizens and molesting women.\(^{39}\) During this time, Muhammad b. Hormoz (who is also called Mowla Sandali), who had become a soldier in the Samanid army, went to the authorities to receive his pay and allowances, but was refused contemptuously, and was told that he was too old to fight any more. He returned in anger to Sistan and went to the courts complaining about the tax increase and other policies of Mansur b. Ishaq. His complaint not only remained unanswered, but he was insulted at the court. Sandali left and sought refuge among the ‘ayyars, who set out to collect an army.\(^{40}\) Subsequently, Sandali and his followers revolted in the capital, beginning at a section where the Samanid army was billeted, killing Samanid soldiers wherever they could be found. Then they

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\begin{align*}
\text{went to the jail, broke in, and} \\
\text{led out the prisoners, with whom} \\
\text{they formed an alliance, Whereupon} \\
\text{Mohammad ibn ‘Abbas Kulaki who}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{39}\) *Tarikh-e Sistan*, p. 239
\(^{40}\) *ibid*, p. 240
was a brave man, appeared, and both
groups joined forces to annihilate
the army [of Manusr].

This revolt was eventually suppressed and the ‘ayyar leaders were sent to Herat
and Bukhara, where they were executed. However, another revolt was raised three years
later in Sistan, this time during the appointment of Simjur Dawati, who was the Samanid
governor of Sistan. This time the ‘ayyars used the weak state of the Samanid armies and
attacked them at night. During the following days, Ahmad b. Muhammad b. ‘Amr,
known as Niya, was informally recognized as the local leader by the people of Zarang,
with ‘ayyar support. One of the significant details that needs to be underlined in this
account is that of the popular support of the ‘ayyars, who are depicted as aiding Sandali
who is victimized by the unjust Samanid rulers. The description of one of the ways in
which the ‘ayyars operated, namely breaking into prisons and setting prisoners free, is
another unique detail regarding the modes of operation of ‘ayyars not to be found in any
other historical source, but recurrent in the popular romances. At the same time, the
‘ayyars have been depicted as agents of justice and hence enjoying popular support.
While no other universal or local history offers an even remotely similar commentary on
the social role of the ‘ayyars, as we shall see, in the popular romances the ‘ayyars ‘
function is to implement justice and defend and protect innocent people who have
received unjust treatment.

*Tariikh-e Sistan* stands out in its depiction of ayyari, given its pro-Saffarid bias
and Ya’qub’s background as an ‘ayyar. We, therefore get glimpses of their modes of

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41 *Tariikh-e Sistan*, p. 241.
42 Ibid, p. 245.
operation, their social background, and their structure, without the negative value judgments that the universal and often local histories contain.

According to Tarikh-e Bayhaq, the 'ayyars were strong in the region of Tus, and Ibn Funduq singles out the 'ayyars as one of the marks of Tus.43 Tarikh-e Bayhaq includes information on rise of the 'ayyars in Tus and their control of Bayhaq. The 'ayyars seized control of the citadel of Bayhaq in 1092 after Malikshah’s death. That revolt was suppressed by Sayyid Abulqasim, who came from Farivmand and together with armed men, started guarding the surroundings of Bayhaq for five months.

Furthermore, at the same time as the revolt of the 'ayyars in the vicinity of Bayhaq, there was a social uprising in Nishabur, which seemed to be connected to the revival of the Karamiya. This turmoil, according to Ibn Funduq spread to Bayhaq and harmed the region tremendously.44

During this time, there had been numerous assassinations of members of the elite, by the members of the popular movement. Ibn Funduq refers to the 'ayyars (who are sometimes called runud) as seditious elements of society and calls them swindlers and profane. Given that Ibn Funduq displays a general antipathy towards the masses, his negative portrayal of 'ayyar is not surprising. At the same time, the evidence of the strength of 'ayyars, and their role in instigating popular uprisings is also reflected in the popular romances. However, in the latter body of works, the 'ayyars are not only justified

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for revolting or assassinating members of the elite, but they are lauded as being heroes for similar behavior.

Despite the varying stances of the sources, the details provided in all three sources are significant, since, as I will demonstrate in the following chapter, they substantiate some of the descriptions of ‘ayyari found in the popular medieval romances. The modes of operations of the ‘ayyars in Tarikh-e Sistan, their portrayal as seditious elements of society in Tarikh-e Bayhaq and their enjoyment of popular support are all present in the popular medieval romances. Therefore, although limited, the information contained in the local histories could serve as a historical context for the descriptions found in the popular romances.

Didactic Literature

The Qabusnameh, completed in the 11th century, is one of oldest specimens of the genre of “mirrors for princes”. The author, Kay Kavus belonged to the princely dynasty of the Ziyarids, who reigned in the South Caspian provinces of Gilan, Tabaristan, and Gurgan. The Qabusnameh is divided into forty-four chapters, covering a variety of subjects on the education and possible occupation for a king. Kay Kavus, addresses his son and successor, Gilanshah. Although the author urges his son to be a good Muslim, his family had probably not long been converted to Islam. Indeed the provinces bordering the Caspian Sea were among the last in Iran to accept Islam. According to Levi, there is evidence that “missionaries” were sent to that region as late as 912 A.D., who invited the
inhabitants of Tabaristan and Daylam to become Muslim. At the same time, Levi points out that in the early stages of the Muslim conquest, it appears that it was chiefly the members of noble families who accepted Islam, for material as well as other reasons.\(^{45}\) This is a significant factor to consider about this work, given the amount and the nature of information it reveals about ‘ayyari. As we will see, Kay Kavus is concerned with the ethics of javanmardi, which are attributed to ‘ayyars.

The subjects covered by Kavus range from manners, obligations and virtues to counsels on how one should eat, sleep, and go to the baths, along with such things as raising children and dispensing justice. The last chapter is concerned with the concept of javanmardi. First Kay Kavus defines groups to whom javanmardi is attributed. These include the members of the military, the ‘ayyars and the merchants. At the same time, he discusses other types of javanmardi, which are those of the mystics and the religious scholars. Regardless of the differences, however, Kay Kavus summarizes the concept of javanmardi as follows: “the essence of javanmardi is made up of three things: first do what you say you will do, second do not stray from honesty, third be patient.”\(^{46}\) In addition to the articulation of the general principles of javanmardi, the author defines the javanmardi of the ‘ayyars:

\[^{45}\text{Kay Kavus Ibn Islandar, }\text{Mirror for Princes: The Qabus Nama, trans. R. Levy, New York, 1951, pp xii-xiii.}\]

\[^{46}\text{Kay Kavus, Qabusnameh, p. 181.}\]
Contained in this passage are indeed the ethics according to which the ‘ayyars operate. All of the virtues described above are attributed to the ‘ayyars of the popular romance of Samak-e ‘Ayyar. In the following chapter, I will discuss these virtues in detail, and one must keep in mind that they are indeed the very same virtues described by Kay Kavus. He also relates an anecdote in which an ãyyar from a city encounters a group of ‘ayyars. The former is set out to test the group of ‘ayyars on their knowledge of jawanmardi by posing the following question:

Suppose a knight-errant (áyyar) to be seated at the roadside as a man comes by. Suppose, further, that a little while later another man comes by, with a sword in his hand for the purpose of slaying the first man, and demands of the knight-errant whether he has seen a man of such-and-such a description passing. What reply should he give? If he says that such a man did pass that way, that constitutes a direction (revealing the secret of the first man). If he says the man did not pass that way, it is a lie. Neither of these is a worthy answer, and in the code of knight-errantry (jawanmardi) both would be regarded as ‘igneble’. 48

The passage underlines the significance of secrecy and truthfulness. The dilemma here is for the ‘áyyar to be both secretive and truthful. As we will see in the following chapter, secrecy and truthfulness are significant parts of the code of conduct for ‘ayyars

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47 ibid, pp. 181-2. Translation: “Know then, my son, that the noblest of all men is he that is endowed with a variety of good characteristics. To begin with, it behoves him to be brave and manly. Then he must exercise patience in every action, be pure in his sexual life and his thinking. He must never desire other men’s loss for his own benefit; on the contrary he must regard as proper the incidence of loss for himself in order to benefit his friends. Let him never oppress the weak let his hand never be stretched out extortionately against captives of war; he must grant aid to them who are deprived of means and he must repel harm from any who suffers wrong.” (Translation by R. Levy from his translation of the work, A Mirror for Princess, New York, 1951, p.244.

48 ibid, p. 244.
in the popular romance of *Samak-e 'Ayyar*. As a matter of fact, the ‘*ayyars* usually swear to uphold these virtues in their initiation oaths.

The information regarding *javanmardi* and its application to ‘*ayyari* contained in the *Qabusnameh* is crucial, if one is to argue that the ‘*ayyars* indeed operated by a specific moral code. Furthermore, the definition of *javanmardi* as we find it in the *Qabusnameh* is very much consistent with how the morals of ‘*ayyari* have been depicted in the popular romances.

Composed in the 13th century, *Javame’ al-Hekayat* is a collection of anecdotes that serve a didactic purpose. The author of this work, Muhammad ‘Awfi, is known for his other work, *Lubabu’l Aibad*, which is the oldest biography of Persian poets. He lived mainly in Khursan and Transoxiana, especially in Bukhara, whence he made his way to India and attached himself to the court of Sultan Nasir al-din Qubacha. According to Browne, *Javame’ al-Hekayat* is a vast compilation of anecdotes of very unequal worth which is divided into four parts, each comprising twenty-five chapters, each of which in turn contains a number of stories illustrating the subject to which the chapter is devoted.\(^{49}\) Despite its value as a historical and literary source, this work has not been studied seriously. As a matter of fact, despite the abundance and the accessibility of the manuscripts, only selections of it have so far been published.

However, unlike the *Qabusnameh* the intended audience of the work does not seem to be a prince or a person of noble birth. Therefore a wider range of topics is covered by *Javame’ al-Hekayat*. Several of the anecdotes are indeed about ‘*ayyari*. Although they contain some hints as to the ways in which the ‘*ayyars* operated, the focus

of the stories is the expression of 'ayyari ethics. The first anecdote concentrates on the value of trustworthiness. A wealthy man entrusts his gold to an 'ayyar by mistakingly taking him to be his servant. The 'ayyar, who initially intended to rob the man, waits for him outside of the bath to return his gold. Astonished to find out that the man he had entrusted his gold to is a stranger, the wealthy man asks the 'ayyar why he wants to return the gold. The 'ayyar's response is that since the gold was given to him on the assumption of trust, the only honorable action on his part was to return it. The second anecdote of this nature relates the story of an 'ayyar who stole a considerable sum of money from a carvansarai by digging a tunnel from a neighboring house. Once an innocent man is accused and tortured publicly for his crime, he claims responsibility for it. He requests to be admitted to the carvansarai in order to return the money. However, once inside, he escapes through the tunnel. This story stresses the significance of the virtues of bravery and taking responsibility for one's actions. At the same time it demonstrates some skills that were associated with the 'ayyars. The use of trickery and digging tunnels are among these skills. The last story highlights the loyalty of the 'ayyars. If a meal, or ritually speaking bread and salt is shared with any person, the 'ayyar enters a pact of loyalty with that person. Having broken into a wealthy man's treasury, the 'ayyar accidentally tastes some salt belonging to the owner of the house. Therefore he is obliged to leave the house without taking anything.

To sum up, the three anecdotes ascribe the virtues of trustworthiness, bravery and loyalty to the 'ayyars. Additionally, in these stories one finds clues as to how they were

50 'Awfi, Javame' al-Hekayat, p.235.
51 ibid, p.259.
52 ibid, pp. 261-2.
perceived in the society, how they functioned, and in which geographical regions they were operating.

Similar to the local histories, which contain details regarding aspects of ‘ayyari’, the relevant information in the Qabusnameh and Javame’ al-Hekayat are significant in that they substantiate the existence of a code of ethics outside of the realm of the popular romances. Furthermore, the description of the ethics in the two texts are consistent, and as I will demonstrate below, they very much confirm the descriptions of the ‘ayyars’ ethics found in the popular romances.

**Popular Medieval Romances**

Unlike the genres of medieval literature discussed above, the popular romances of this period are inundated with detailed description of ‘ayyars’, their modes of operation, their ethics, and their organizational structure. However, one must keep in mind that the various narratives belonging to the genre belong to different literary traditions, and have distinct literary functions. As such, the ‘ayyars’ in each narrative possess varying degrees of significance and consequently the purview of the details in depicting the ‘ayyars’ varies. The Darabnameh, for example, is one of the narratives classified in this genre. Z. Safa the editor of the Darabnameh, which is about the Keyani king Darab the son of Bahman and Alexander, claims that it also originates from an oral tradition⁵³. The author of the narrative is identified as Tarsusi or Tartusi, to whom other narratives have been attributed.⁵⁴ Unlike Samak-e ‘Ayyar, the Darabnameh has been mentioned in various

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⁵⁴ ibid, v. I, p. 20.
medieval works. As a matter of fact there is evidence that this literary tradition existed in the pre-Islamic Pahlavi literature.\textsuperscript{55} The dating of the work is not clear; however, based on the linguistic evidence, Safa guesses the work to have been composed no later than late sixth century (hijri).

The portrayal of ‘\textit{ayyars} in this work, however, is confined to the use of the word as a qualifier. In other words, a number of heroes are referred to as being ‘\textit{ayyars} or possessing ‘\textit{ayyar}-like qualities. For example, Alexander the Great, who appears in the second half of the story, challenges one of the warriors to fight with him, and let people decide who is “more” ‘\textit{ayyar} (عیار) of the two.\textsuperscript{56} At another point, Buran-Dokht, Darab’s daughter, who is leading an army against Alexander, reproaches his army for their lack of ‘\textit{ayyari}.\textsuperscript{57} Therefore, in this narrative we not only do not encounter professional ‘\textit{ayyars}, but we are also left in the dark as to what being an ‘\textit{ayyar} actually means. This lack of description leads one to the conclusion that the audience of this work had a specific definition of this term. Unfortunately, in most cases where the word is used, the context does not shed light on the possible meaning of it.

\textit{Hamzehnameh} is a fictional account of the adventures of Hamza, one of the uncles of prophet Muhammad. Like the other popular narratives, the date of completion of the work is not included in the text. However, J’afar Sho’ar, the editor of one of the published editions, guess the date to be sometime in the fourth or fifth century (hijri). The narrative of the adventures of Hamza generated a rich manuscript tradition, especially after it became popular at the court of the Mughul ruler, Akbar. Hence it is one of the few

\textsuperscript{55} Safa, Hemaseh Sarayi dar Iran, Tehran. p. 544.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, v. II. p. 53.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid, v. I. p.516.
popular narratives for which there are illustrated manuscripts. The narrative takes place during the reigns of Qobad and Anushirvan and ends when Hamzeh, the hero of the story, returns to the Arabian Peninsula, converts to Islam, and is killed in the Battle of Uhud.

In the *Hamzehnameh*, however, we encounter professional *'ayyars* that are distinguished from the royal heroes. ‘Umar Umayyeh, the right hand man to Hamzeh, is the most famous of the *'ayyars*. ‘Umar’s use of trickery\(^58\), disguise\(^59\), and digging tunnels\(^60\) single him out as a skillful *'ayyar*. Additionally, his use of unusual weaponry set him apart from the other heroes. He is described as using a paper shield on the battlefield, and a small mangonel (for throwing stones) as a weapon.\(^61\) However, unlike the *Abu Muslim Nameh* or *Samak-e *'Ayyar*, the narrative does not offer any information as to the organization or the ethics of the *'ayyars*. Furthermore, while there are other *'ayyar* characters beside ‘Umar in the *Hamzehnameh*, they are not depicted as members of a popular social institution. In other words, the phenomenon of *'ayyari* is by no means as widespread and frequent in the *Hamzehnameh* as it is in the *Abu Muslim Nameh* and *Samak-e *'Ayyar*.

In his introduction to the first volume of the only published edition of *Samak-i *'Ayyar*, P. N. Khanlari asserts that there is no mention of this work and its author in any other books, and all the information at hand stems from the text itself.\(^62\) According to the text, the author, who is also referred to as the collector of the story, is identified as Faramarz b. Khodadad b. ‘Abdallah b. Al-Katib Al-Arjani. However, the narrator of the

\(^{58}\) Ibid, v. I., p. 35.
\(^{60}\) Ibid, v. I., p.145.
story is another person by the name of Sadaqa b. Abi al-Qasim Shirazi. This is a significant fact, as it hints at the oral origins of the narratives. Furthermore, according to Khanlari, from the use of language and the style of composition of the narrative it is clear that it was intended for oral recitation.\textsuperscript{63} It is not at all clear when the book was composed, however, based on the linguistic evidence, Khanlari guesses that it cannot be any more recent than the late Saljuq period (1038-1194).\textsuperscript{64} However, Khanalari postulates that the kernel of the tradition is much older. There is no mention of the names of historical or contemporary historical eras or events in the narrative. The references to history and historical figures start with Kayumarth and end with Alexander, and hence Khanlari speculates that the tradition is of Parthian origin.\textsuperscript{65} While it is not easy to simplify the subject of the narrative, it can be said that it is about the adventures and the exploits of Khorshid-Shah and his ‘ayyars.

The \textit{Abu Muslim Nameh} is the pseudo-historical account of the ‘Abbasid revolution, which having originated from Khorasan eventually reached Damascus, toppling the Umayyad caliphate.

It has been guessed that the earliest manuscripts were completed during the Timurid era (1382-1507). The history of this literary tradition, and its usage as a tool for propaganda (among other things) is much more clear than the other two narratives.\textsuperscript{66}

The abundance of ‘ayyar characters in the \textit{Abu Muslim Nameh} and \textit{Samak-e ‘Ayyar} necessitates detailed descriptions of their skills, their modes of operation, and

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{63} ibid, v. I p. 6.
\textsuperscript{64} ibid, v. I p. 6
\textsuperscript{65} P.N. Khanlari, \textit{Shar-i Samak}, Theran, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{66} For an example of this kind of analysis see: K. Babayan’s dissertation. Princeton University, 1993.
\end{flushright}
their organization, which is precisely the case in these two romances. However, a major
distinction between the two texts, as far as the depiction of ‘ayyari is concerned, does
exist. While the Abu Muslim Nameh is certainly not devoid of description of the ethics or
the moral code of the ‘ayyars, such references are rather implicit. In contrast, Samak-e
‘Ayyar is very much interested in articulating the desirable moral behavior of the ‘ayyars.
Therefore, in this work, we find many instances of the initiation oath embedded in which
are the major tenets of the ‘ayyari ethics.

Despite their differences, the Abu Muslim Nameh, and Samak-e ‘Ayyar contain
the most detailed descriptions of ‘ayyari. Indeed in these two popular romances, the
‘ayyars assume a central role, and as such it becomes a necessity to describe their social
status, modes of operation, ethics, and internal structure. Therefore, in the following
chapter, I will describe how different aspects of ‘ayyari have been represented in these
two popular romances.
CHAPTER 4

POPULAR HEROES: THE ‘AYYARS OF ABU MUSIM NAMEH AND SAMAK-E ‘AYYAR

Unlike the sources discussed in Chapter 2, the popular romances of Samak-e ‘ayyar and Abu Muslim Nameh are inundated with detailed descriptions of the social institution of ‘ayyari. However, since neither modern scholarship nor the discussion of the primary sources could offer a basic definition of ‘ayyari, before focusing attention to the details, I would like to offer such a basic description. It must be noted that Parvaneh Pourshhariati, who has been studying the depiction of ‘ayyari in the popular romances for at least the past five years, has described many of the same aspects of ‘ayyari in numerous lectures. Therefore many of the descriptions laid out in this chapters have first been observed and discussed by her.

The ‘ayyars are groups of young men and women who function as paramilitary forces. They operate according to a code of conduct and what seems to be an ethical system, which seems to have roots in a pre-Islamic religious system. While there are instances of cooperation between the ‘ayyars, and the ruling powers, often times the
‘ayyars stand in opposition to the status quo. As such they are perceived to be the agents of justice, and enjoy enormous popular support. The ‘ayyars are not conventional warriors, and therefore neither possess conventional weapons and armaments, nor do they fight on the battlefield. In accordance with their subversive nature, their operations either take place while they are in disguise, or during the darkness of the night. The ‘ayyari operations usually, but not always, involve either breaking into a place such as a prison or the palace of an official or opening the gates of a city or the citadel of a city to the army of the supporters.

This chapter is organized in two parts. The first part attempts to shed light on the social background, the ethics and the nature of membership in the ‘ayyar brotherhoods. The second part is mainly concerned with the ways in which the ‘ayyars functioned as a para-military group.

PART I : SOCIAL BACKGROUND, ETHICS AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Social background

As pointed out by Pourshariati, the ‘ayyars as depicted by the two popular romances are of plebian background, and their bases of support seem to lie in the lower strata of the population. Samak, who is depicted as an ideal ‘ayyar, is the son of the shahabdar (a low-ranking courtier in charge of keeping and serving wine). After Samak achieves a high status in the court of Khorshid-Shah, he changes his name from Samak to

Alam-Afrouz. This name change is significant. The king does not like the name of Samak, because it is the name of a commoner and it cannot be associated with nobility. Other ‘ayyars have names or epithets that reflects their previous profession, such Jangjouy-e Ghasab (Jangjouy the butcher) 69, Gilak-e Motreb (Gilak the minstrel) 70, Ali-e Tabbakh (Ali the cook) 71, and Tahir-e Beryangar 72. Although ‘ayyar can be used as an adjective to describe a pahlevan (noble warrior’s) bravery, the two groups are distinct. While both pahlevans and ‘ayyars play “heroic” roles throughout these texts and are to be found in both camps, pahlevans are clearly of noble descent. The other important difference is in their mode of action. While ‘ayyars generally do not fight on the battlefield, for the pahlevans the war arena is the stage on which they demonstrate their physical ability to fight their opponents and their dexterity in handling weaponry. For example, Samak, who is the ideal ‘ayyar, admits on many occasions that he does not know how to fight on the battlefield (meydan dari nemidanam) 73. Furthermore, Samak is described as being physically weak, which stands in contrast to the descriptions of the noble warriors. 74 It is important to note that if a member of the ‘ayyar brotherhood is depicted in the battlefield, usually his appearance and weapons are unusual and subject to ridicule. As we shall see later, due to the nature of their operations that ‘ayyars are not mounted.

69 Ibid, v. II. p. 323.
71 Tarsusi, Abu Muslim Nameh, v. II p.436.
73 Samak-e ‘ayyar, V.I p.341.
Agents of Justice

The ‘ayyars are the undisputed heroes of Samak-e ‘ayyar, and their struggle for justice is the main theme of the romance.\(^7^5\) While in the Abu Muslim Nameh they are not given the center stage, they function as a specialized military force in the army of Abu Muslim. Despite their different positions and significance in the two narratives, the image of ‘ayyari which they offer is similar: they are groups of young men and women who have sworn to fight for the cause of justice.

As the instruments of justice, the ‘ayyars enjoy enormous popular support.

While Samak and his ‘ayyars are allied with Khorshid-Shah and operate on his behalf, one never loses sight of the fact that Khorshid-Shah and later his son Farokh-Ruz are kings who epitomize justice. Upon the conquest of new territories, they relieve the poor from the burden of high taxation and other injustices that they have incurred by their previous rulers. After the conquest of the city, of Machin, for example, Khorshid-Shah sends a herald to the city, announcing to people to go about their business, because Khorshid-Shah will bring justice and there will be no oppression and confiscation of people’s wealth and all of the king’s opponents are free.\(^7^6\) Similarly, the ‘ayyars of Abu Muslim are fighting against the injustices of the Umayyads whose legitimacy as caliphs they dispute. Therefore, by aiding the camp of Abu Muslim, the ‘ayyars act as implementers of justice. Additionally, in more than once instance, after robbing the

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\(^7^5\) The role of ‘ayyars as the instruments of justice has also first been pointed out by Pourshariati in “The Unjust, The Unbelievers and the Mahdi: The World According to the Abu Muslim Namas,” Ohio State University, Dept. Of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, Feb. 7, 2000

\(^7^6\) Khanlari, Samak-e ‘Ayyar, v. 2, p.49.
treasury of the Umayyad officials, they distribute the stolen goods amongst the people.77

Another sign that indicates that the ‘ayyars operate in accordance with a code of justice is their attempt not to harm ordinary people during their operations. For example, Bibi Seti, the famous ‘ayyar woman of Abu Muslim Nameh, devises a plan to take over the city of Balkh without harming its residents.78 These actions of the ‘ayyars underline their function as agents of justice.

The authorities are very well aware of the popular support of the ‘ayyars and avoid direct conflicts with them. When Touti-Shah decides to fight a battle against Samak and his ‘ayyars, his Vizir, Khaqan, advises him against it:

They are not worth being fought against, because people will say he fought against his own ro’aya (subjects), and murdered and plundered them. Since the hearts of the people are always with the weak, the people will become divided and no matter who loses, the real loss will be yours.79

The ‘ayyars are therefore viewed as the catalyst for revolts and popular upheaval, precisely because of the support of various strata of the population. Despite the fact that most ‘ayyari operations, as we will see, take place in secret and usually during the night, the ‘ayyars sometimes lead a popular uprising against the rulers. After arriving in the city of ‘Uqab, and discovering that he has many supporter, for example, Samak openly rises up against the king of the city in the market place.80 A similar incident occurs in the Abu

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78 ibid, v. II, p. 441.
Muslim Nameh: the ‘ayyars enter a mosque through a tunnel, and the lead ‘ayyar, Abu Nasr-e Shabro, drags the khatib, who is praising Marwan, down from the minbar by his beard, cutting his head off in front of the crowds. Subsequently, the ‘ayyars who were mixed in with the crowd rise up openly against the Umayyad official in that city. As we have seen, this depiction of ‘ayyars as seditious elements of the society is consistent with that of the Tarikh-e Bayhaq. While the status of the ‘ayyars in the popular romances is that of the hero, in Tarikh-e Bayhaq they are described as thieves and murderers.

Regardless of the value judgment, however, one of the ways in which the ‘ayyars of the popular romances operated is consistent with the actions of the ‘ayyars as depicted in Tarikh-e Bayhaq.

In both popular romances we find groups of ‘ayyars who serve the status quo and are therefore in the wrong camp. In Samak-e ‘ayyar, for example, Kanun and his teacher Khatur, who are skilled ‘ayyars, hold the position of the esfahsalars (commanders) of the city of Machin, which is under enemy control. In the Abu Muslim Nameh as well there are ‘ayyar-type characters, such as Daghuli the spy, who while proficient in ‘ayyar skills, belong to the camp of Kharajites and are therefore the arch enemies of the Abu-Muslimites. However, unlike the Abu Muslimites, the Kharajites by no means enjoy the support of the existing ‘ayyar groups of various cities. As a matter of fact, at one point Nasr-e Sayyar, the Umayyad governor of Khuarsan, complains to his companions about the fact that there are no ‘ayyars in his camp.

\[81\] Tarsusi, Abu Muslim Nameh, v. II. P.255.
Organizational Structure

In the *Abu Muslim Nameh* and *Samak-e ‘ayyar*, the ‘*ayyar* brotherhoods are organized in a loosely knit hierarchical structure. Each group has a master who not only enjoys seniority, but is also extremely proficient in the skills of ‘*ayyari*, which I will discuss in Part II of this chapter. Usually, the master in each urban center serves as the leader of the ‘*ayyars* in that city. For example, Shoghal-e Pirzur, who is Samak’s master is the ‘*ayyar* leader of the city of Chin. Another important distinguishing characteristic of these brotherhoods is that for them ‘*ayyari* seems to be a profession. Although some of the names of the ‘*ayyar* allude to the fact that at some point they belonged to the artisan class, entering an ‘*ayyar* brotherhood puts an end to their former careers, if they indeed pursued any such career. Most of the novices are in fact young people who either belong to an ‘*ayyar* family, or have secretly taken an oath to become an ‘*ayyar* once they find a reputable master.

Initiation oaths are central to admittance into ‘*ayyar* associations. In Samak-e ‘*ayyar*, drinking wine after taking the oath of alliance or Shadi Khavri serves as symbol of loyalty\(^3\), while in the *Abu Muslim Nameh*, drinking is a strictly Kharajite behavior which is not sanctioned by Abu Muslim, who represents the model Muslim. Considering the fact the Abu Muslim Nameh does reflect Islamic sensibilities, and the already existing portrayal of the Umayyads as debauched, corrupt, and illegitimate caliphs, it is not surprising that in the *Abu Muslim Nameh*, drinking is reserved for the Kharajites. However, the importance of drinking in association with initiation oaths and declaration of loyalty must not be overlooked. Drinking is not only a virtue for Samak and his

\(^3\) *Samak-e ‘Ayyar*, v. II p.247.
‘ayyars, but Samak himself has been suckled on wine, and in many instances the person’s
tolerance for wine is equated with his maturity or his skill as an ‘ayyar\textsuperscript{84}. Additionally,
the notion of shadi-khari being a shadi-khorde of ‘ayyars recurs throughout the narrative,
especially to describe the loyalty of ‘ayyars in foreign territories to Samak.\textsuperscript{85} In addition
to shadi-khari, the descriptions of verbal initiation oaths are ample.

While my aim is not to engage in the discussion of the origin of ‘ayyari, it must
be noted that the initiation oaths sworn by the ‘ayyars in Samak-e ‘ayyar contain
unmistakable references to one or more pre-Islamic Iranian religious systems. In the
absence of Islamic religious terminology, the most frequently used term for referring to
God is yazdan, and the most frequently used epithet is dadar-kerdegar. According to
Dehkhoda’s Lughatnameh, dadar, which means the dispenser of justice occurs in the
Avesta and is always the epithet of Ahura-Mazda.\textsuperscript{86} The fact that this is the most common
way of referring to God in the narrative, especially when swearing or praying, indicates
the strong presence of traces of Mazadean beliefs in the narrative. In addition to
invocation of the name of God in its indisputably Zoroastrian form, other supernatural
beings or deities regularly occur in initiation oaths of the ‘ayyars\textsuperscript{87}. Some of the names
invoked in the initiation oaths are as follows: mur (light), nar (fire), mehr (Mithra), seven
stars, zand, pazand, the soul of the pure, and qadah-e mordan (the cup of men)\textsuperscript{88}. The

\textsuperscript{84} Samak-e ‘Ayyar, v. I. p.118
\textsuperscript{85} ibid, v. II, p.248.
\textsuperscript{86} Dehkhoda, Lughatnameh, Tehran. p. 10243.
\textsuperscript{87} Parvaneh Pourshahiati, in her presentation at SIS conference has argued for the pre-Islamic provenance of
the religious panorama of these initiation oaths, underlining their Mithraic dimension. However the
discussion of which pre-Islamic religious trend and sect is most strongly represented in the text is beyond
the scope of this paper.
III p.12, .152.
significance of light and fire in the context of Zoroastrian theology as the representatives of the forces of good is rather obvious. Zand and Pazand are said to be the Avesta and its interpretation, although there are conflicting theories as to which text was the original and which was the interpretation. While the pre-Islamic connotation of the references discussed thus far are clear, this is not the case for “seven stars”. The seven stars may refer to the seven stars that had by that time become synonymous with deities, such as Bahram. Whatever the significance of the seven stars may be, it is highly likely that is rooted in one of the pre-Islamic Iranian religions. On the other hand the identity of Mehr or Mithra is clear.

An important Indo-Iranian god, he gains significance in the new Avesta and becomes the axis of power in the world of gods. In the Avesta the tenth yasht is devoted to him. In Samak-e ‘ayyar, the soon to be ‘ayyar woman Rouz-Afza pledges the following oath for example:

I swear to the forgiving God, who is the protector to pure souls, that my heart is with you. I swear to be the friend of your friends and the enemy of your enemies. I will never divulge your secrets or take any action to your detriment. I pledge to do good deeds and to refrain from doing good. I will never trick you or have bad thoughts, and if your friendship will cost me my life, so be it. If I don’t fulfill my promise, I am not one of the mard-kerdar women.

The initiation oath, which appears in the verbal format, or could be pledged by the ritual wine drinking (shadi-khari), therefore, is the first step to becoming an ‘ayyar.

89 M. Bahar, Pajuhesi dar Asatir-e Iran, p.80.
This initiation oath is a mirror of the ‘ayyari ethics: loyalty to the cause, which is reflected by the pact of being the friend of the friends of the ‘ayyars and the enemy of their enemies, secrecy, doing good deeds, having good thoughts, and risking ones’ life for the sake of friendship. In addition to these one must honor their promises, or as Samak puts it:” never say that which you cannot do”90. The ‘Ayyars are supposed to strive for a good reputation and not to be motivated by material considerations. When offered land as a reward for his services to Khorshi-Shah, Samak protests his decisions, saying:

I am a poor man, who has chosen ‘ayyari as a profession. If I can earn my daily bread, I am happy. Otherwise, I wander around and serve the ‘ayyars and jawanmards. If I do anything, it is for the sake of my good reputation, and not money. 91

Therefore, the ‘ayyar’s motivation, as articulated by Samak, is his striving for a good reputation, not material reward. Generosity, secrecy, abstaining from lies, and granting everyone their right92 are the cornerstones of ‘ayyari ethics. As mentioned before, the Abu Muslim Nameh does not contain as many explicit articulations of the ‘ayyari ethics. However, the traces of the same codes of conduct can be found in the way the ‘ayyars in the Abu Muslim Nameh behave. For example, Mahyar, the Zoroastrian, who is an Abu Muslimite, refuses to tell the Kharajites that Abu Muslim is staying in his house. By keeping the secret, Mahyar remains faithful to his pact of friendship with Abu Muslim.93 In another episode, when some of the ‘ayyars have fallen

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90 Khanlari, Samak-e ‘Ayyar, v. 4., p. 353
91 ibid, v. 1 p.317.
92 Khanlari, Samak-e ‘Ayyar, v.2, p.224
93 Abu Muslim Nameh, v. I. P.624.
into the hands of the Kharajites, Abu Nasr reminds the ‘ayyars that if a misfortune befalls one of them, it afflicts all ‘ayyars.\footnote{ibid, v. I. p. 639.}

Chastity is another virtue that is highly praised by ‘ayyars. It is in fact a prerequisite for the highly significant participation of ‘ayyar women in these romances. Once initiated into the group, the members must abstain from extramarital sexual relation. However, some ‘ayyar women decide to abstain from all sexual relation. One such woman is Ruz Afzun, the famous ‘ayyar woman of the Abu Muslim Nameh. When captured by an enemy who offers to marry her, she proclaims:

> Although God has created t women for men, and there is no shame in marriage, my heart is free from [the desire for] men, and all men of the world are my brothers. If a man attacks me, I will fight him, and if I cannot protect myself, I will kill myself. I plead with God to keep me in this fashion, and protect me from dishonor, and not leave me in the hands of any man, so that I shall keep my purity on the judgment day.\footnote{Samak-e ‘Ayyar, v. II p.62.}

When ‘ayyar men and women go on a mission, they perform a rite by which they are declared to be as brothers and sisters. These brotherhood-sisterhood contracts are common throughout the story and are made not only between the members of an ‘ayyar group, but also whenever a woman needs to cooperate with or accompany an ‘ayyar man.

**Women ‘Ayyar**

Before describing the status and position of women in the ‘ayyar groups, I would like to discuss a phenomenon that seems to have been an integral aspect of the
associations: the ‘ayyar family.96 In both Samak-e ‘Ayyar and the Abu Muslim-Nameh we encounter entire families of ‘ayyars, usually headed by the mother. When Sorkh-vard, who later is revealed to be a woman, decides to join the ‘ayyars of Samak, his mother, who is already hiding Samak in their home, shares his wish to meet Samak with her. Concerned about her son’s motives, she asks:

What is your goal and why are you seeking him out. If your intentions are good, you must promise and swear in the presence of your mother that what you are saying is the truth. You must tell me that you want to meet Samak in order to serve him and befriend him, and you don’t want to betray him to the king.97

Subsequently, Sorkh Vard takes an initiation oath and becomes a member of the ‘ayyar brotherhood. Sorkh vard is not the only other ‘ayyar member of his family: his brother, Atashak is also a novice in the brotherhood. A similar scenario is described later on in the narrative. Again, Samak has been offered refuge by an old woman, who in turn has a son who is seeking Samak out in order to join the ‘ayyars. He is obliged by his mother to take an initiation oath, before the presence of Samak in the house is revealed to him.98 In the Abu-Muslim Nameh, the central ‘ayyar woman, Bibi Seti, is the head of an ‘ayyar family which includes her husband Abu Nasr-e Shabro and her brother Taher-e Zagh pa.99 The ‘ayyar family does not seem to be particularly significant in the internal hierarchy of the ‘ayyar brotherhoods. For example, not all ‘ayyars come from ‘ayyar

96 The existence of ‘ayyar families and ‘ayyar women was first noticed and discussed by Pourshariati in "The ‘ayyar women of the Abu Muslim Nama and the Samak-i ‘Ayyar," Oxford University, Sept. 20, 2000.
97 Samak-e ‘Ayyar, v. I pp. 149-150.
families, and therefore it cannot be considered as defining structural unit of the brotherhoods. However, its existence and recurrence in both texts signifies a widespread and strong social presence of ‘ayyari among the populace. Furthermore, the existence of ‘ayyar families provides a natural environment for the presence and participations of women in the ‘ayyar associations, and broadens the range of activities and responsibilities assumed by women ‘ayyars.

Indeed there are many women ‘ayyars of different status and rank, the rank being determined by their skills. Rouz-Afzoun, for example is a skillful ‘ayyar who could be considered Samak’s female counterpart. Among the ranks of Abu Muslim’s ‘ayyar is Bibi Seti, the central female figure of the narrative. Often she enters the narrative and takes over an operation when all other measures have failed. An example of such an operation is when the army of Abu Muslim, as well as the ‘ayyars, are unable to overtake the city of Balkh. Bibi Seti, who is also referred to as mother of men, puts together a group of ‘ayyar women and orders them to wear their armor and carry their weapons under their veils. The ‘ayyar women indeed penetrate the citadel of the city, and open it to Abu Muslim’s army. In another instance, when Abu Muslim has been captured and imprisoned by the enemy, and all measures to free him have failed, Majilis Afruz-e Samarqani, a famous woman ‘ayyar of Samarqand, appears in the gathering of ‘ayyars of Marw. Upon hearing the difficulties of ‘ayyars in their unsuccessful attempts to free Abu Muslim, she says:

Bravery and struggle, and wisdom and ‘ayyari and trickery and shabravi (night-strolling) comes in handy on this day. Now, come and admit to your helplessness, and

Then I will bring Abu Muslim out so that all of you become amazed.\textsuperscript{101}

Indeed she is able to locate Abu Muslim, and set him free in the course of a typical ‘ayyari operation. However, not all ‘ayyar women are superior to the male ‘ayyars. Indeed there are many other female ‘ayyars in both texts who do not have a high rank. Moreover, there are women who strictly speaking do not fit the definition of an ‘ayyar, but assist them by either offering them refuge or by granting them access to otherwise unreachable spaces such as the court or the prison.

An example of such a woman is the Hajar-e Dalaleh (Hajar the matchmaker) in Samak-e ‘ayyar. When she is asked to assist Samak, she stays:

\textit{You should know I am a matchmaker, and my name is Hajar, I want to become known for my javanmardi. Material wealth is of no value to me, and I give it away to whoever is in need. Although you see me veiled, my rank is higher than a hundred cavaliers} (سياهی).\textsuperscript{102}

As Pourshariati has argued, the relatively large number of women involved in various positions in these brotherhoods, and the diverse realm of their involvement and their actions, along with the existence of entire families of ‘ayyars, argues for the existence of women ‘ayyars in reality. Furthermore one must distinguish between these women, and the women warriors, who also appear frequently in these narratives. Unlike women warriors, who are depicted as perfect heroines, stronger and mightier than their male counterparts in all aspects, including physical strength, ‘ayyar women are involved

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid, v. I, p. 646.
\textsuperscript{102} Khaniari, \textit{Samak-e 'Ayyar}, V.4, p.199
at all ranks and all levels of the operation. Since the ‘ayyars are not warriors, at least not in the conventional sense of the term, the women who partake in ‘ayyari operations have different set of skills than that expected of a woman warrior. Furthermore, women warriors often marry the hero whom they were fighting. This, of course, is not the case with ‘ayyar women, who are from a much humbler social background than the heroes, and in most cases are not interested in marriage.

**Urban Setting**

‘Ayyar- brotherhoods are urban-based. Each town has its local brotherhood of ‘ayyars, who have sworn their alliance to the just cause. Outside of cities the ‘ayyars seem to be in foreign realms. The mountaineer (Kuhian) in Samak-e ‘ayyar, for example, cannot counter Samak’s trickery, because they have never heard of ‘ayyars or ‘ayyari.103 Similarly not all regions seem to have ‘ayyar associations. In the Abu Muslim Nameh, the army of Shirvan-Shah, whose kingdom is defined as the territory of Azerbaijan, is not able to prepare a counter attack against the ‘ayyars because there does not seem to be any ‘ayyars in their camp. In contrast to this region, all major urban centers of Khurasan, such as Marv, Balkh and Herat, have ‘ayyar brotherhoods who are identified as belonging to each particular city. The ‘ayyars of the each city are able to mobilize the ‘ayyars and their sympathizers. For example, ‘Ata-ye Ma’ruf, the ‘ayyar leader of Heart, brings an enforcement of seven-hundred men to Abu Muslim’s aid.104 There is a special emphasis on the strength of the ‘ayyars of Balkh. Many or the ‘ayyars are mentioned several

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103 ibid, v I, p.339.
104 ibid, v. III p.15.
times. ¹⁰⁵ When Bibi Seti and the ‘ayyar women help capture Balkh, she reminds everyone that in this city “everyone is an ‘ayyar”. ¹⁰⁶

The ‘ayyars have established sanctuaries in the cities, offering other ‘ayyars and in some cases common criminals refuge. An example of such place is Saray-e Shirin in Samak-e ‘ayyar. ¹⁰⁷ Being off limits to the king and his army, Saray-e Shirin is not only a sanctuary for those who are being persecuted by the authority, but also functions as headquarters for planning and executing revolts and other plots against the rulers. Similarly in the Abu Muslim Nameh there are references to the house of ‘ayyars in various cities. ¹⁰⁸

Part II: Skills and Operations

The ‘ayyars adhere to a strict ethics, are organized in hierarchical organizations, have elaborate initiation oaths and allow for women to participate amongst their ranks. But with all this elaborate organization and ethics, how do they actually operate? The ‘ayyars are night-strollers, an activity which in fact gives them their second name, shabro. Indeed being able to accomplish their tasks in the darkness of night is one of the main skills an ‘ayyar must acquire. Many of the ‘ayyari operations, such as digging tunnels or breaking into prisons, take place in the darkness of the night. Therefore, the ‘ayyars’ time of action is the nighttime, and this explains the epithet of shabaro. This

¹⁰⁶ ibid, v. II p. 408.
¹⁰⁷ ibid, v. VI, p.171.
¹⁰⁸ Abu Muslim Nameh, v II p.45.
epithet in fact has been attributed to some ‘ayyar characters, as well as to ‘ayyars in general.

Weapons and Garments

When not in disguise, the ‘ayyars wear a garment made out of felt (namad) and carry ‘ayyari tools, which include knives, kamands, daggers, arrows and files for iron, and bags of medicine, to name a few. In both popular romances there are passages that describe the ‘ayyari tools or weapons in detail. It is noteworthy that these tools are usually referred to as yarq-e ‘ayyari (‘ayyori equipment) or ashab-e shabravi (shabravi tools), and not selah or salih, which is usually used in reference to weapons and armament of the conventional warriors. The list of the tools used by the ‘ayyars is rather long, and in some instances it is not clear what exactly the name refers to. When Samak is about to get ready for an operations, he takes a knife, a kamand ?, a mail coat (which he wears under his felt garment). Then he coils the kamand around his arm, and attaches a dagger to it. ¹⁰⁹ Therefore, for this particular ‘ayyari operation, Samak equips himself mainly with knives and a kamand. The kamand is used to allow an ‘ayyar to climb up a wall of a building, and as we will see, this is one of the ways the ‘ayyars gain access to certain spaces. In the Abu Muslim Nameh, where the ‘ayyars also use the kamand frequently, the special ‘ayyari kamand is described as being a ladder woven from silk, at the bottom of which there are two bones (from sheep’s feet) that serve as stands, and on top of it there is a large hook. ¹¹⁰ However, there are various other tools that are used by

¹⁰⁹ Khanlari, Samak-e ‘Ayyar, v. I, p.44.
¹¹⁰ Tarsusi, Abu Muslim Nameh, v. I., p. 608.
'ayyars, if the operation involves digging a tunnel. In this case they carry various types of files (for iron) and pincers and snuffers with them. In the Abu Muslim Nameh, there is a particular passage where the 'ayyari tools are described in detail. The list of the 'ayyari tools contains description of different types of garments, which presumably were used for disguise. The rest of the items described read as follows: zereh (mail coat), khanjar-e naqb-bori (a dagger used for digging tunnels), khanjar-e sar-bori (a dagger used for cutting off heads), ganj kav?, katareh (short spear), anbur (pincers), kaysak (a smith's hammer), arreh (saw), suhan (a file for iron or wood), miqraz (shears), band-say (a tool used for breaking chains), sh'amche-ye mumi (a waxen candle), fitile-ye 'ayyari ('ayyari wick), atash borak ?, and a kamand.\footnote{Tarsusi, Abu Muslim Nameh, v. II, p. 47.} The necessity of such tools will become more clear as we learn about what is involved in a typical 'ayyari operation. While the knives and daggers are conventional weapons, tools such as files, hammers, pincers, special daggers for digging the earth, were used for the purpose of digging tunnels. Furthermore, since the actions took place during nighttime, the 'ayyars needed a source of light which explains the purpose of carrying candles and similar devices with them. Lastly, various types of clothing are listed among the 'ayyari tools, and that is due to the fact that disguise is one of the very significant 'ayyari skills.

Trickery and the Art of Disguise

When appearing during daytime, the 'ayyar must be able to disguise himself and change his/her appearance as needed for any given situation. In many instances, Samak and other male 'ayyars go out veiled while 'ayyar women often dress as men. Similarly,
Abu Muslim puts on a veil to disguise himself as woman.\textsuperscript{112} However, the art of disguise is not confined to dressing as a man or woman. The ‘\textit{ayyars} of both narratives dress up as members of different social classes and professions or adopt regional clothing to conceal their identity. Since examples of disguise are numerous, I will just give a list of some of the examples which occur in both texts. 1) The ‘\textit{ayyars} of Abu Muslim enter a mosque in \textit{yaraq-e halva-gari} (dressed as sweet-makers?),\textsuperscript{113} 2) Daquli, the ‘\textit{ayyar} of the Kharajite camp, dresses up as shepherd,\textsuperscript{114} 3) Zulabi, a well-known Abu Muslimite ‘\textit{ayyar} appears as an angel,\textsuperscript{115} 4) a group of ‘\textit{ayyars} dress up as itinerant merchants,\textsuperscript{116} 5) Bib Seti appears as a fortune teller,\textsuperscript{117} 6) Samak and Ruz Afzun dress as shopkeepers,\textsuperscript{118} 7) Samak and Ruz Afzun appear as jugglers\textsuperscript{119} 8) Samak dresses as a female dancer,\textsuperscript{120} 9) Samak and Abrak (Samak’s disciple) disguise themselves as beggars,\textsuperscript{121} 10) Samak appears as a minstrel.\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid, v. I, p.652.
\textsuperscript{113} Tarsusi, Abu Muslim Nameh, v. II, p. 296.
\textsuperscript{115} ibid, v. II. p.511.
\textsuperscript{116} ibid, v. II p. 343.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid, v. II. p.413.
\textsuperscript{118} Samak-e ‘Ayyar, v. II p. 239.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid, v. IV p. 137.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid, v. IV, p.144.
\textsuperscript{121} ibid, v. IV, p. 246.
In addition, 'ayyars know many tricks which help them change the color of their hair and complexion. For example, Samak uses a medicine to darken his complexion, and braids his hair in the fashion of desert-dwellers. They 'ayyars, therefore, impersonate people of different professions: they act as minstrels to enter the court of the kings, open up a candy shop in the bazaar to monitor enemies activities, and pretend to be merchants leading a caravan into an otherwise inaccessible fortress. Another deceitful skill is the use of bihushane, a substance which is usually mixed with wine and renders the enemy unconscious. While the use of bihushane is extensive in Samak-e 'ayyar (mainly due to the fact that descriptions of drinking occur much more frequently), the 'ayyars of Abu Muslim make use of this substance as well.

Yet another much celebrated skill which aids the 'ayyars in their art of disguise and personification is their virtuosity in many different languages. Samak, for instance, is fluent in Turkish, Halabi, Hindui, Chinese, and Pahlavi languages to name a few. Likewise, Ruz Afzun is fluent in Pahlavi. Upon entering Tus, which is still under the control of the Kharajites, the 'ayyars of Abu Muslim speak the language of Tus. Daquli also is proficient in Turkish, Daylami, Syriac, Hebrew, 'Ajami, Arabic, Zangi, Hindui and Persian. Additionally, they are well-versed in religious sciences such as Qur'an and the Hadith. While there is little mention of religious (Islamic) sciences in Samak-e 'ayyar, we learn that Samak posses esoteric knowledge which allows him to

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122 Tarsusi, Abu Muslim Nameh, v. II, p. 64, vll, p. 510.
124 Ibid. v. III, p.173.
125 Yaghmai, Abu Muslim Nameh, p.588.
127 Yaghmai, Abu Muslim Nameh, p.575.
read the undecipherable code which prophesies his and his patron’s messianic role in the narrative\textsuperscript{130}. As a matter of fact, the ‘ayyars must be willing to learn under any circumstances. Samak, who is the ideal ‘ayyar, is said to have

never rested from learning. He learned everything no matter how good or bad or difficult. He also learned different scripts, science, problem solving as it may turn out to be useful. He also learned how to tell jokes, and be quick in responding to questions, and to be witty, as well as trickery and disguise and devising a solution to a problem. He learned everything from anyone, and said it is going to be of use to me one day. He was an excellent scribe, and he was able to read difficult scripts. He was able to write in different scripts, and he could imitate anybody’s handwriting. He also knew things in astrology and wisdom (حكمت).\textsuperscript{131}

As it is apparent from the list of expertise that Samak has acquired, a resourceful ‘ayyar needed to expand his skills of disguise by learning different languages, and by being able to write letters on other people’s behalf.

Digging Tunnels, Throwing \textit{kamands}\textsuperscript{132}

‘Ayyars often need to break into prisons and set prisoners free. The ‘ayyars must accomplish this task under very difficult, if not close to impossible, circumstances and break into impregnable prisons, wells, fortresses, and castles. Digging underground tunnels, which allows them to free their imprisoned friends or kidnap their enemies, is a specific ‘ayyari skill. Having knowledge of the city’s layout and architecture, ‘ayyars use neighboring houses or public places (such as a bathhouse, for example) as the starting

\textsuperscript{131} Samak-e ‘Ayyar, v. III, pp.34-5.
\textsuperscript{132} A \textit{kamand}, as it is used by the ‘ayyars is a rope with a grappling hook attached at the top.
point of a tunnel. Sometimes they use pre-existing underground structures to start digging a tunnel. From choosing the location, to disposing of the dirt which piles up as a result of digging, to calculating the direction of the tunnel, all details are carefully attended to by an accomplished ‘ayyar. When Samak and his ‘ayyars arrive in the city of Daylam, they seek out a skilled tunnel-cutter. Finally they are told that there is an ‘ayyar by the name of Gav-e Siah who has achieved mastery in tunnel-cutting. Gav-e Siah’s method of digging involves consulting the stars and constellations in order to determine the right direction of the tunnel as well as disposing of the dirt slowly. 133 Likewise, in the Abu Muslim Nameh, the ‘ayyars are constantly required to dig tunnels to gain access to various spaces, especially to the citadels of various cities. As is the case with many other cities, the capture of Herat becomes entirely dependent on a successful ‘ayyari operation. This is especially true in the case of Herat because “there is no other city on the face of the earth, which has better fortification”134. In the Abu Muslim Nameh the city is described as having a fortification wall and a citadel. Both the citadel and the city walls are surrounded by a moat135. The term used to describe the citadel is kohan dez, which literally translates to “ancient citadel”. The city of Herat has five gates: Khush or Khushk gate, Iraq gate, Firuzabad gate, Kohan Dezhe gate, and Khyaban gate. In addition to these there is a passing mention of a Shemiran gate, which seems to have been close to the gate of the citadel. Out of the gates mentioned, the Kohan Dezhe (or Citadel) gate is the hardest to penetrate, because as the name suggests, the citadel is located directly behind that gate. All the gates are described as having drawbridges over the moat, and well as some kind

135 ibid, v. III, p.34.
of a roof, for protection against the stone throwers.\textsuperscript{136} The moats of the citadel have a roof made out of baked bricks, on top of which there is a wall connected to the city wall.\textsuperscript{137} Inside the citadel, in addition to houses, there are 700 silk/brocade studios, belonging to a certain Yahya-ye Dibabaf (Yahya the brocade weaver). Given this elaborate fortification, it is not possible for the army to penetrate into the city. The ‘\textit{ayyars}, however, are able to dig tunnels which lead them directly to the houses located at the center of the citadel. Once inside the citadel, they assassinate important military figures such as the gatekeeper and the military commander of the citadel, and open the gates to the army.\textsuperscript{138} Likewise, when the army of Abu Muslim reaches Bakh they are not able to penetrate the city. As is usually the case, this task of opening the main fortress of the city (Hinduwan fortress) is left to the ‘\textit{ayyars}. It is important to note that there are historical references to the Hinduwan fortress. The names of all monuments are historical, and references to them can be found in various literary sources. In Mukhtarov’s book, \textit{Balkh in the Middle Ages}\textsuperscript{139}, the names of these monuments appear. Mukhtarov’s work is based on written sources and the information of eye-witnesses, as well as the remains of the city. According to him, the most ancient part of the city is called Hinduwan fortress, whose legendary origins are traced to the time of King Luhrasp, who imported builders from India. Hence it became the fortress of the Hindus\textsuperscript{140}. The inner city or Shahr-e Darun was defined as the structures within the Hinduwan fortress and is consistent with the depiction

\textsuperscript{136} ibid, v. III, pp.34-45.
\textsuperscript{137} ibid, v. III, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{138} ibid, v. II, pp. 54-61.
\textsuperscript{139} Mukhtarov, A. \textit{Balkh in the late Middle Ages}. Bloomington, 1993. p.18.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid, p.19.
in the *Abu Muslim Nameh*. The fortress is described as having a moat.\textsuperscript{141} From the geographical histories we learn that this fortress was often times the center of government and administration which Timur repaired during his reign. Similarly in the *Abu Muslim Nameh*, the son of the governor of Khurasan, who is in charge of defending Balkh, resides in the Hinduwan fortress. The siege of the fortress is the last step of the ‘\textit{ayyari}’ operation because prior to their control of the fortress, the party of Abu Muslim has seized control of the city itself. In this case, Bibi Seti along with eight other ‘\textit{ayyar}’ women, is able to cross the drawbridge of the moat (since they are covered in veils and pretend to be helpless women, who are seeking refuge from Abu Muslim’s army), while the male ‘\textit{ayyars}’ gain access to the city through a tunnel.\textsuperscript{142} Abu Muslim’s and the ‘\textit{ayyars}’ task of digging a tunnel is particularly difficult since the fortress has a moat. Therefore, Abu Muslim starts digging a tunnel under the moat. Then the ‘\textit{ayyars}’ drill a hole on top of the tunnel, draining the water from the t. Once the moat becomes empty, the ‘\textit{ayyars}’ use the same tunnel and climb up to the moat and attack the gatekeepers.\textsuperscript{143}

In order to dig tunnels the ‘\textit{ayyars}’ often use pre-existing underground structures. Samak and his ‘\textit{ayyars}’ for example, uses a house that had a deep well, and was located in the proximity of the palace as the starting point for their tunnel. Such dried wells were not only the hiding place for the ‘\textit{ayyars}’ of Abu Muslim, but they also provided access to otherwise impregnable spaces.\textsuperscript{144} It is important to note that the irrigation system of the urban centers depended on the underground *qanat* tunnels, hence it could hardly be

\textsuperscript{141} Al-Maqrizi, *Ahsan al-taqasim fir ma’rifat al-aqlam*, p. 307
\textsuperscript{142} Tarsusi, *Abu Muslim Nameh*, v. II pp. 454.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid, v. II p.40.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid, v. II p. 251.
argued that these spaces are the imaginary products on the part of the narrator. The tunnels, wells, and other underground structures constitute a web of spaces that are off-limits to the rulers. Therefore, it is not only significant for the ‘ayyars to be able to create such spaces, by digging them, but also to have a detailed knowledge of the pre-existing underground structures.

The other way in which the ‘ayyars gain access to a space is by climbing on to the roof with the use of a kamand. Throwing a kamand is a skill which an ‘ayyar needs to master. In both narratives the ‘ayyars are described as practicing this skill. For example, in the Abu Muslim Nameh, Abu Atta, one of the ‘ayyars, is able to enter the central mosque of Marw by throwing a kamand on top of a minaret and climbing up to the roof of the mosque. In Samak-e ‘ayyar, Sorkh-vard (an ‘ayyar woman, who marries Samak) is a novice and lacks ‘ayyari skills. She is therefore reproached by Samak for her lack of knowledge of how to throw a kamand. The roof is a significant space as far as ‘ayyari operations are concerned. When an ‘ayyar reaches the roof top of a structure, he is able to gain access to that particular building, usually descending to the inner court of the building. Since the roof tops of the houses of the cities are described as being connected, the roof also can serve for escaping from the enemy.

Once they have gained access to a palace, the ‘ayyars do not refrain from stealing valuable objects, which in turn will be distributed amongst the poor. The ‘ayyars rarely engage in an activity for the sole purpose of acquiring wealth, for the main objective of an operation is usually to kidnap someone or set prisoners free. Sometimes during the

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146 Samak-e ‘Ayyar, v. 1 p. 216.
147 Tarsusi, Abu Muslim Nameh, v. 1 p. 592.
course of their action, which often takes place in the palaces of the elite members of the society, they do steal valuables. Whatever is acquired during such an ‘ayyari operation is then distributed either among the people or among all ‘ayyars and their followers. For example, after having gained access to the palace of an Umayyad official, Abu Nasr-e Shabro steals a golden object.\textsuperscript{148} In another episode, the ‘ayyars of Abu Muslim practically loot the court of another Umayyad official.\textsuperscript{149}

Stealing enormous amounts of valuables under difficult circumstances became a skill that only an ‘ayyar could accomplish, and often in classical literature became associated with ‘ayyari. Hafez uses this characteristic metaphorically, which suggest that this association was familiar in his milieu.\textsuperscript{150}

The heroic depiction of ‘ayyars in 
\textit{Samak-e Ayyar} and \textit{Abu Muslim Nameh} is consistent with the production milieus of these traditions. Both narratives are rooted in a rich oral tradition that seems to have been sustained amongst the common people. The heroes of these narratives are of the same social background as the audience, and as such the heroic image offered by these traditions is that of the populace. Unlike the heroes of 
\textit{Shahanameh}, Samak, who can be regarded as an archetypal popular hero, is physically weak and lacks other characteristics associated with \textit{Pahlevans} (royal heroes). In many instances he is afraid to accomplish a task which may require physical strength or fighting in the battlefield. Usually at these times he becomes afflicted by his chronic abdominal pain which “deters” him from completing the task at hand. What makes him a

\textsuperscript{148} Tarsusi, \textit{Abu Muslim Nameh}, v. II p.274.
\textsuperscript{149} ibid, v. II, p.222.
\textsuperscript{150} Hafez:

\begin{quote}
تكهیه بر اختر شیب‌گرد ممکن کلاین عیار
تاج گلوس برود و کمر گیخش و
\end{quote}

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hero, nevertheless, is his trickery, his art of disguise, his ability to adapt to unknown situation, all of which are attainable by a commoner. Another example of such a hero is Bib Seti, the famous 'ayyar woman of Abu Muslim Nameh, who in addition to all the standard 'ayyari skills, is very well versed in the art of storytelling, a skill which she utilizes to trick the enemies. Therefore, by attributing his own skills to the hero of the story, the storyteller assumes the role of a hero himself.

Although the use of trickery as one of the main 'ayyari skills seems to be entirely contradictory to their pact, which obliges them to remain truthful at all times, one must take into consideration that this code of conduct is only relevant when the 'ayyar is interacting with other 'ayyars or people belonging to the camp of justice. Considering their political and social function, it is not surprising that the medieval universal histories, which reflect the interest and ethos of the elites, gave such a negative depiction of the 'ayyars. The significance of the depiction of this social institution in the popular medieval romances is precisely in their heroic portrayal of 'ayyari. It is this heroic portrayal that results in an interest on the part of the popular romances to depict details of the social institution of 'ayyari, some aspects of which I have described in this chapter.
CONCLUSION

Despite the different value judgments, there are parallels between the depiction of the popular romances and that of the other genres of the medieval literature examined in the previous chapter. As I mentioned earlier, the ‘ayyars of Samak-e ‘ayyar and Abu Muslim Nameh at times function as catalyst for popular revolts. They are also known for the threat they posed to members of the elite, which in some cases resulted in their assassination. This function of ‘ayyari is very much similar to the role of ‘ayyars as described in Tarikh-e Bayhaq (which I have talked about in detail in the previous chapter).

The striking resemblance of the ethics of the ‘ayyars, as articulated by Kay Kavus in the Qabusnameh and as they are expressed by the various ‘ayyar characters in the popular romances, is another significant similarity that cannot be easily dismissed. A closer comparison of the list of virtues attributed to ‘ayyars in Qabusnameh and the popular romances leads one to conclude that both literary genres are indeed describing a code of conduct in which secrecy, truthfulness, loyalty to the cause, and helping the needy are the basic rules.
The mores associated with ‘ayyari, as found in ‘Awfi’s Javame’ al-Hekayat are similarly associated with ‘ayyari in the popular romances. ‘Awfi’s relevant anecdotes ascribed the virtues of trustworthiness, bravery, and loyalty to the ‘ayyars.

A quick look at what is considered to be the ethics of ‘ayyari, as described in the popular romances, will indeed reveal that the same set of values were among the characteristics that the ‘ayyars aspired to.

The depictions of al-Tabari and al-Mas’udi, despite the hostile disposition of the authors towards the ‘ayyars, are also consistent with the representation offered by the popular romances. Although in both al-Tabari and al-Mas’udi’s accounts, the ‘ayyars do fight on the battlefield, they are by no means conventional warriors. As mentioned in the previous chapter, their weaponry and military skills seem rather improvised and hints at the fact that they were not trained to fight on the battlefield.

The modes of operations and some other characteristics of ‘ayyars of Tarikh-e Sistan mirror the actions and attributes of the ‘ayyars of Abu Muslim Nameh and Samak-e ‘ayyar. The ‘ayyars of Sistan gain access to the citadel of the city by climbing up to a neighboring roof. As explained earlier, such an action is a classical case of an operation directly associated with the ‘ayyars. Additionally, the āyyars of Tarikh-e Sistan, like the ‘ayyars in the popular romances are organized in local urban associations. The āyyars of Sistan are a distinct group from the āyyars of Bost, as is the case for example for the ‘ayyars of Balkh and the āyyars of Herat. The role of the āyyars as upholders of justice, in the case of Sandali’s revolt, is also very much consistent with the role of āyyars in the
popular romances. In the process of aiding Sandali, they stir up the population in what
develops into a anti-Samanid revolt. In the same episode, the 'ayyars break into a prison
in order to set Sandali free.

As mentioned earlier, breaking into otherwise impenetrable spaces is a task that is
usually associated with 'ayyari. In short, all the descriptions of 'ayyari found in *Tarikh-e
Sistan* are consistent with that of the popular romances.

Notwithstanding the varying and sometimes contrasting value-judgment of
medieval sources, the descriptions of 'ayyari found in all sources seem to be consistent.
The different value judgments could easily be explained in terms of the social
background, and hence the different agenda of the various sources. While sources like al-
Tabari and al-Mas'udi reflect the interest of the elite of the society, the popular romances
offer glimpses into the worldview of the populace.

While my aim was not to argue for its historicity, at least not in this study, by
establishing the parallels between the depiction offered by the popular romances, and that
of various other genres of literature, it is difficult to dismiss this depiction as either an
imaginary creation or an ideal topos of 'ayyari. In order to accept the depiction as a
historical one, however, scholarship needs to engage in the questions of definition of the
genre of popular romances, and to examine its value as a source for reconstruction of
aspects of medieval Iranian society. By demonstrating the similarities of depictions of the
social institution 'ayyari, as offered by the historical sources to that of the popular
romances, I hope to have taken a small step in that direction.
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